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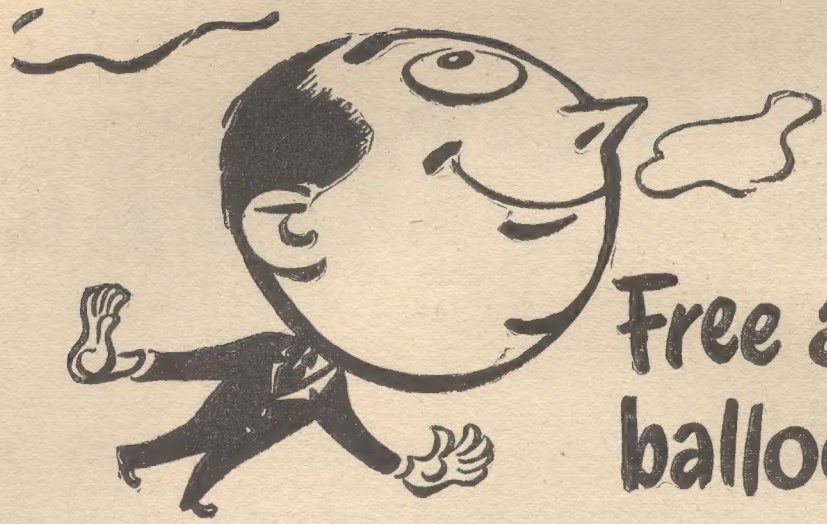

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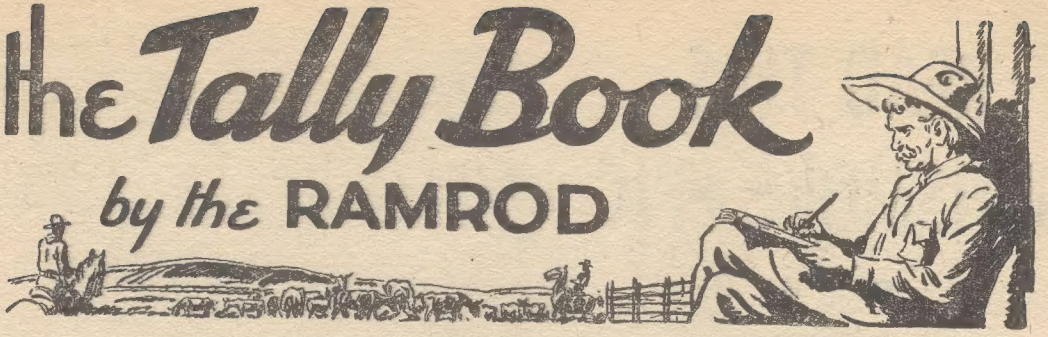
The Tally Book by the RAMROD



A DEPARTMENT WHERE ALL HANDS GET TOGETHER TO RIDE HERD ON THE WESTERN FICTION ROUNDUP

THINKING about next issue's novel, TALLY THE LONG YEARS by William Hopson, puts your old Ramrod into kind of a reflective mood. In the first place, this is not only one of the best stories GIANT WESTERN has ever printed, but right up at the top of the heap of western stories we've ever read anywhere! It's really a remarkable job—and I know you'll enjoy it.

TALLY THE LONG YEARS has more of the honest feel and smell of the range country than any novel I can think of. Hopson was born and bred a Texas cowpuncher and all he has to do to get real atmosphere is to open up his memory—and let 'er flood!

Cowboy Turns Outlaw

Well, with the bouquets out of the way, I'd like to get back to what I was saying about this book making me kind of quiet and thoughtful. You see, the story of TALLY THE LONG YEARS is the story of a decent cowboy named Clay Burch, a hard-working, honest kid with a good heart, who never hurt anyone and never wanted to hurt anyone in his life. And Clay Burch was made an outlaw.

It happened this way: Clay had come back to the ranch where he worked to find the town liveryman waiting for him with news.

"Clay, I don't exactly know how to tell you, but I expect you'd better saddle a fresh hoss and come into town. You—uh— see, Colter, the banker from Cedar City come over today to see Burton at the bank in town. Seems he had a buyer for them buildings of your dad's and the two of 'em had loaned the money for the mortgage. Your dad couldn't pay, so they sorta foreclosed."

Clay felt sick inside. "That was a dirty trick. Dad was keeping up the interest. And he's too old and crippled up to go to work again."

"That's just the trouble, Clay. It's why you better come in town."

"What is it?"

"Clay, I sure hate to tell you this. Your dad went home from talking to Burton and Colter, and took out his old six-shooter and shot himself. He's dead, Clay."

One Purpose

Something deep and permanent changed in Clay Burch as he heard those words. He hardly heard his boss' words of caution, his advice about not losing his head. He knew only that his father was needlessly dead—all for a little money—killed as surely as though he had been murdered.

He saddled up and went to town. Clear in his mind was one purpose, to square up with the banker Burton, who, he felt, had actually murdered his father. Not to kill him—Clay thought he would suffer more if he were hit where it hurt even more—in the pocketbook. He found a ready accomplice in Eddie McCarthy, a young newspaper reporter of the town who had just been fired for writing that Burton had murdered Clay's father.

With Eddie, Clay went to his father's buildings, for which he still had keys. He poured kerosene on the floors and tossed matches into it. By the time he got back into the saddle, the buildings

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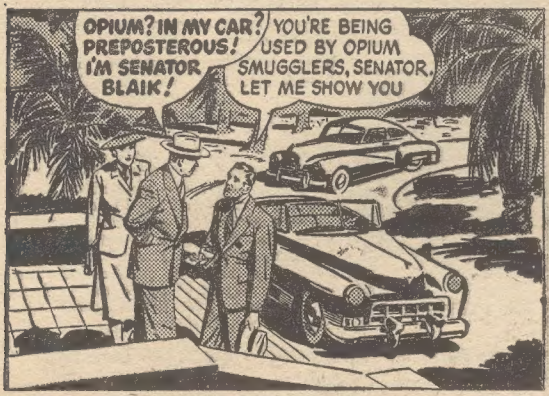

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EXACTLY! AND TONIGHT THE GANG AT THIS END WILL TRY TO NAB IT. MAY I USE YOUR 'PHONE?

THAT'S THAT. WELL, YOU FOLKS HAVE YOUR DINNER. I'LL BE BACK ABOUT NIGHTFALL
WHY NOT STAY AND HAVE A SNACK WITH US?
SURE. COME UPSTAIRS AND FRESHEN UP

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I'M SOLD ON THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE PLENTY KEEN AND LONG-LASTING

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a novel by

GEORGE MICHENER

Did Harry Severn's badge signify the majesty of the law—or only the power of money and influence?

Bob Devoe gasped, and turned to look into Severn's gun. (Chap. XIII)

NO guns for hire

I

HARRY SEVERN was leaning against the porch rail of Sam Teller's house. He was leaning there for three reasons—because the shade of an adjacent elm took the curse off the hot, bright, nooning sun, because from here he could watch the courthouse across the way, and because it gave him a chance to talk with Peg Teller.

Peg was standing on the porch behind Harry Severn, a dust cloth around her head and a broom in her hands. She, too, was gazing toward the courthouse. A buggy and several buckboards were halted in the street and there was a scattering of saddlers. Three men, small farmers from Horse Flats to the north, were grouped by the open door

of the courthouse and peering inside. The men seemed angry.

Peg came closer to the porch rail. She spoke over Harry Severn's shoulder.

"I guess Martin's on the stand now," she said.

Severn nodded. "Probably."

"What do you think, Harry? Will he stick to his story?"

Severn, gloomy and silent, shook his head. He was a chunkily built young man with powerful wrists and hands, and dark, tough features. He was also —as he freely would have admitted— tough minded. There was no nonsense about Harry Severn. You looked out for number one first, for if you didn't, you were likely to wind up behind the eight ball. That was Harry Severn's philosophy, driven into him by a foster father's bull whip and learned anew on dim, borderland trails. There was a deputy sheriff's badge on his coat.

Sam Teller came out of the house and paused on the porch. He was a small, neat man in his early fifties. A diamond stud gleamed on his white shirt front. His eyes were blue and hard. He nodded to his daughter and Severn.

"They won't convict him," he said.

"But Martin saw the whole thing," Peg said protestingly. "Martin says Monahan never had a chance. Jean Targen just pulled his gun and shot him down."

"They won't convict him," repeated Sam Teller.

"Mebbe," said Harry Severn, "I made a mistake. When I brought Jean Targen in, some of the Hoss Flats boys stopped us. They wanted to string Jean up. Mebbe I should have let 'em."

"No," said Teller, "yuh did right. Yuh brought Jean in—that was yore job. And"—he smiled faintly—"Cole Devoe will get him off. That's his job."

"But Martin—" began Peg.

"Martin," said Teller, "will switch his story. Martin has a wife and kids to take care of. That's his job." He went down the steps and looked back at Severn. "It's a hard world, Harry."

SEVERN made no reply. He watched Sam Teller cross the dusty street and enter the Blue Bull Saloon. Teller owned the Blue Bull.

Peg made mechanical sweeping motions with her broom. She was small like her father, and had high cheekbones and full, half-smiling lips. Her eyes were large and darkly expressive. Sam Teller claimed that Peg's mother, who had died when Peg was born, had been a very beautiful woman. Severn could believe that.

He spoke suddenly. "How old are yuh, Peg?"

"Twenty-two." The girl looked up. "You know, Harry, that's the first personal question I ever remember you asking me."

"Well—" Severn frowned, then said evasively, "I didn't think yuh were that old."

"I am, though. I've been around."

Severn nodded. He guessed Peg had seen a good many places. Sam was a professional gambler and he had played all the boom towns, dragging Peg along with him. Sam had landed here in Brinker City at about the same time Harry Severn had—three years ago. Sam had bought the Blue Bull Saloon and sworn to Peg that he was settling down for good. Maybe he was and maybe he wasn't. Sam Teller was a restless person.

"Did Cole Devoe come in town today?" asked Peg.

"Oh, yes. He's not at the trial, though."

"Bob come in, too?"

"I guess so. If he did, he'll show up here pretty quick." Severn grinned slightly. "Bob Devoe's a nice feller. He'll come into a barrel of money when old Cole dies."

PEG leaned on her broom. She stared defiantly. "Anything wrong with money?" she demanded.

"Nope. I wish I had a bucketful myself."

"Sam's right," said Peg. "It's a hard world. You're a fool if you don't take what comes your way."

"That's right," said the deputy.

His ready agreement seemed to anger the girl. Color showed on her cheeks.

"Alice Devoe," she remarked cuttingly, "is a nice feller, too, isn't she, Harry?"

The deputy was silent. Uneasily he rubbed his chin.

Peg leaned closer. Her dark eyes softened as she said quietly:

"We aren't fools, are we? Neither of us."

"No-o. I guess not, Peg."

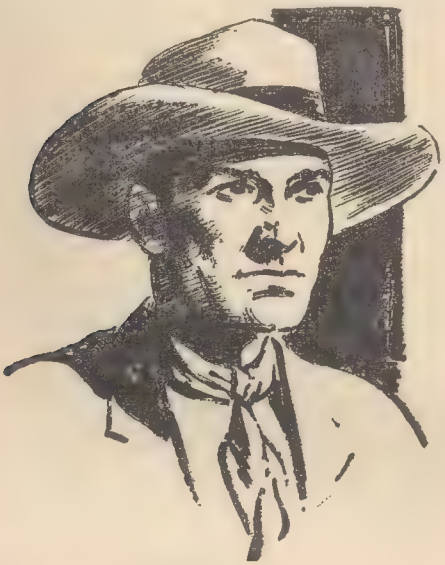
"We understand each other, don't we, pardner?"

"I guess we do, Peg."

"Do we?" Peg gave a brittle laugh.

She turned abruptly and ran into the house. She slammed the door.

For a moment Severn frowned after her. Then his attention went back to the



Harry Severn

courthouse. Something was happening across the way. The three men by the courthouse entrance surged forward, then halted as they were joined by two more from inside the building. The five —all Horse Flats men—stood there in an angry group. One of the men yelled at someone in the courtroom and shook his fist.

Sheriff Mark Trimble, spare, angular and graying, hustled out of the courthouse. He pushed through the knot of Horse Flats men with a swimming motion of his long arms and hurried across the street toward Severn. The deputy straightened. He guessed trouble was coming.

The sheriff strode up to Severn.

"Get your hoss," he said in a low voice. The sheriff's brown eyes were worried.

The deputy settled his coat. "Martin?" he asked briefly.

The sheriff nodded. "That's it. He just got off the stand. He switched his story—says now that Monahan went for his gun first."

"So Cole Devoe did get to Martin, did he?"

The sheriff looked uncomfortable. "Get yore hoss," he repeated.

"I've already got it. Over there. Right by Martin's."

"Good. I'll go in and get him. If we can get him out of town before the trial's over, we can make it without any trouble."

"Want me to go in with yuh?"

"No!" said the sheriff sharply. "You ain't so popular with the Hoss Flats men, either. You just lay low. I'll get him out to his hoss. All I want you to do is ride along with him out of town. Mebbe yuh'd better go all the way home with him."

"All right."

The sheriff hesitated. He gazed doubtfully at his deputy.

"No trouble now," he warned. "If the Hoss Flats fellers try to start something with Martin, you just ease him home easy."

"All right," said the deputy again.

THE SHERIFF shook his head in worried fashion and hastened back to the courthouse. Severn followed at a leisurely pace. He took his station by his and Martin's horses and waited.

Through the open window of the courtroom he heard a clipped, rapidly speaking voice. The prosecution was making its summation to the jury. It wouldn't be long now, the deputy guessed. Martin's testimony would have collapsed the whole case against Devoe's gunman, Jean Targen. The judge would charge the jury, and the jury would file out.

The verdict was now a foregone conclusion. Jean Targen would go free—free to try his expert hand at another little killing.

Harry Severn looked down at his law badge and scowled.

"The majesty of the law!" he thought sourly. Which was strictly a laugh.

What his badge actually symbolized—as he well knew—was the majesty of Cole Devoe and his barrelful of money.

The deputy jerked up his head. Sheriff Trimble was escorting the witness, Martin, from the courthouse. Martin, an insignificant little rabbit of a man, was crowding close to the sheriff as the two brushed through the group of Horse Flats men on the stoop. Someone stuck out a foot, and Martin tripped. The sheriff caught the little man by the arm and whisked him down the steps. The Horse Flats men started to follow.

The sheriff gave Martin a thrust toward his horse, then whirled to face the men behind him. Placatingly the sheriff held up a hand.

"Now, now!" he cried. "Careful, boys. Watch it, boys!" His voice sounded thin and weak in that sunlit street.

Martin came on at a run. Severn from the hitchrack. The deputy climbed into his own saddle.

A thick-set, black-bearded man strode out into the street beside Sheriff Trimble and stood there motionless.

could see more men boiling out from the courthouse—angry men, shouting after Martin. A woman, sunbonnet dangling on loose ribbons, popped out. She was yelling and pointing her finger at Martin. Her face was viciously contorted.

Sheriff Trimble remained solidly planted on the walk. His two long arms sawed the air.

"Now, now," he pleaded again. "Easy, boys!"

Martin reached his horse, grabbed the reins from Severn and scrambled into the saddle. For a moment Severn held to Martin's horse.

"All right," he said soothingly. "No hurry. Just keep your hoss walking."

Martin stared dully down at him without answering. The deputy stepped back, and Martin swung his horse away

"Martin!" he called sharply, and there was an intonation in that single word that carried threat and shriveling contempt.

Severn turned his horse and followed after Martin.

"Martin!" called the black-bearded man again.

Severn saw Martin's thin shoulders quiver as if at the impact of a blow. The little man did not look back.

"Severn!" called the black-bearded man.

The deputy drew alongside Martin. "Not so fast," he said easily. "Just a steady walk. We're not runnin'."

The two horses moved sedately along the sun-hot street.

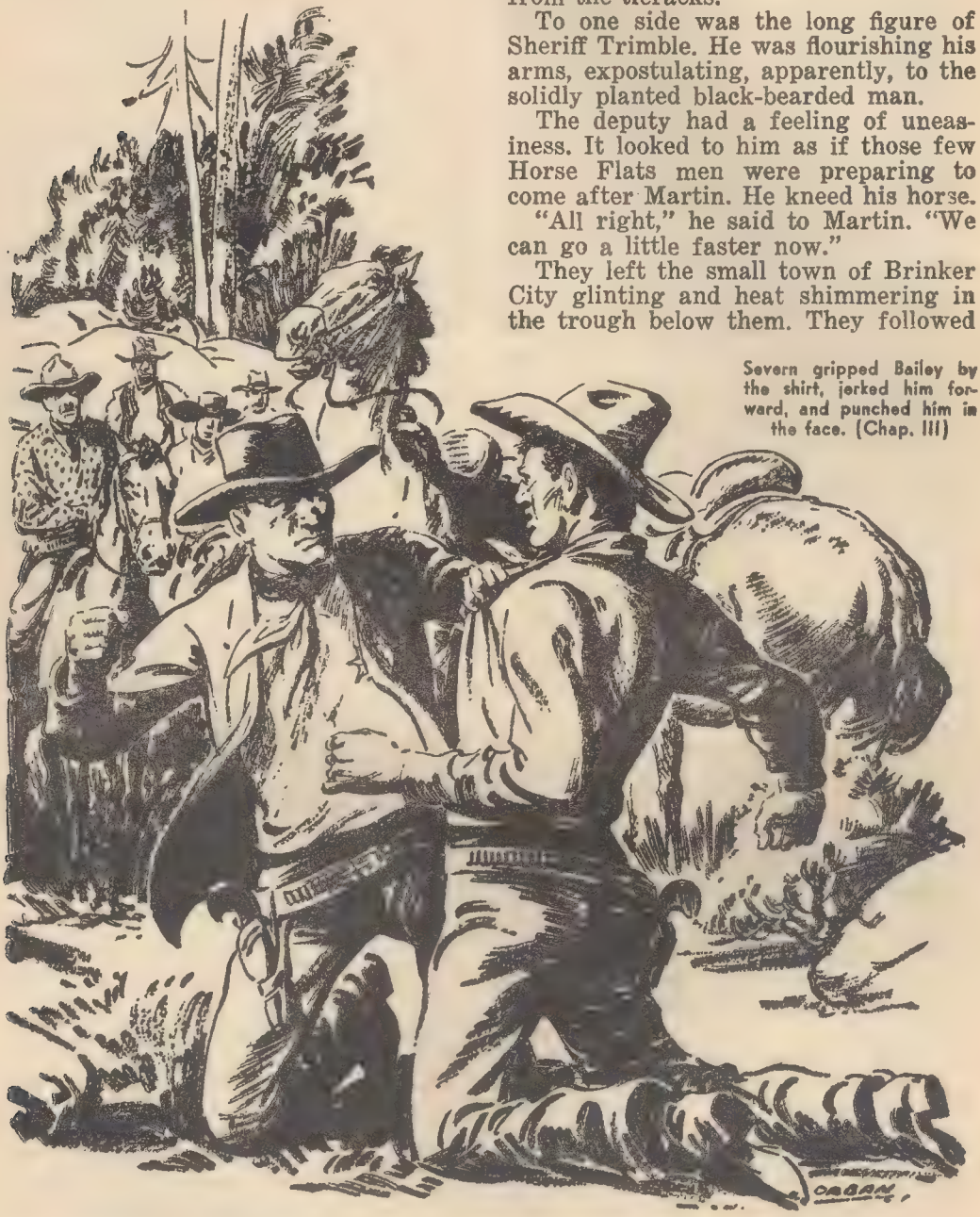
Most of the Horse Flats men — so Severn judged—had straggled back into the courtroom to wait the conclusion of the trial. A few, however, remained in the street, were getting their saddlers from the tieracks.

To one side was the long figure of Sheriff Trimble. He was flourishing his arms, expostulating, apparently, to the solidly planted black-bearded man.

The deputy had a feeling of uneasiness. It looked to him as if those few Horse Flats men were preparing to come after Martin. He kneed his horse.

"All right," he said to Martin. "We can go a little faster now."

They left the small town of Brinker City glinting and heat shimmering in the trough below them. They followed



Severn gripped Bailey by the shirt, jerked him forward, and punched him in the face. (Chap. III)

II

BEYOND the town limits, Severn glanced back. The walk where the sheriff had taken his stand now was empty. the Horse Flats trail, Severn and little Martin, through the bench grasslands toward Squaw Gorge. As the trail climbed, the pasture thinned and browned. Rock heaps appeared. An oc-

casional bullpine made its solitary showing. The two riders halted. Martin rolled a cigarette. He stared at the deputy and spoke for the first time.

"Them crooked lawyers!" he said.

The deputy was inscrutably silent.

There was a sort of wild defiance in Martin's eyes. "They twist a man around!" he cried. "A man don't know what he's sayin'!"

The deputy considered him remotely. He knew it was no lawyer who had twisted Martin around—it was fear. That, and maybe a few thin droppings from Cole Devoe's barrelful of money. Now a new fear was taking hold of Martin — fear of his neighbors, the Horse Flats men whose cause he had betrayed. Martin was the lonely little man, one of the many little men of this world fated to walk always in fear.

A faint pity stirred the deputy. He said gently, "Yuh told me yuh saw the whole thing. Yuh told me Monahan never made a motion for a gun. Jean just pulled and killed him. What was it yuh told on the witness stand? That Monahan went for his gun first?"

Martin shifted his gaze. "I don't remember," he said sullenly. "When those lawyers get at yuh—"

"Not lawyers. Who else got at yuh, Martin?"

"That's a lie!" Martin shouted instantly. "I know what yuh're thinkin'! Yuh think Cole Devoe bought me off. It's a lie!"

"Is it? It's what everybody's thinkin'."

"To blazes with everybody!"

"Jean Targen," Severn continued implacably, "is goin' to get off clear. Pretty soon he'll shoot somebody else. You won't be popular with the Horse Flats folks after this, Martin. Mebbe yuh'd better pack up and move somewheres else."

"To blazes with 'em!" shouted Martin. "I'll move when I'm good and ready!" He drew the back of his hand across his stiffening lips, then gave a high-pitched laugh. "A lot you've got to talk about," he cried. "You wearin' that badge! You're Devoe's man yourself!"

The deputy shrugged. He didn't bother to reply.

"Mebbe we'd better get movin'," he suggested. "We might have company."

They went on. Martin glanced nervously behind him. He gazed at Severn with frightened eyes.

"I ain't scared of 'em," he proclaimed thinly. "That ain't why I'm pullin' out."

"But yuh're pullin' out."

"Why not? I sold my place the other day."

"Let me guess," said Severn. "Yuh sold to Devoe."

Martin looked down at his hands. "Yes," he muttered.

Severn nodded. The pattern was clear now. The price Martin had received for his switch in testimony was the price Devoe had given him for his small dab of land. Monahan dead and Martin gone —another victory for Cole Devoe, another set-back for the Horse Flats hoemen who were encroaching upon Devoe's barony of land and cattle.

THE trail mounted to the rim of Squaw Gorge. Stunted pine, free undergrowth, made a scattering stand here, the shadow-laced way soft with its layer of brown needles. The horses moved quietly.

Martin rode with twisting head and sharp, darting eyes. Severn felt vaguely drawn to the frightened little man. In a way, he mused, he himself, was also a frightened man—only his was different from the physical fear that was Martin's. Moodily the deputy thought of the mission which had brought him to Brinker City, a mission that still was unaccomplished. For so long had he hesitated.

"He who hesitates," Severn thought wryly, "is frightened. Me and Martin!" He made a grunting noise deep in his throat.

Martin jerked around. "You say somethin'?"

"No," replied the deputy. "I was just laughin'. I was wonderin' if I shouldn't pull out, too."

Martin didn't seem to hear. He was staring at something beyond the fringe of trees. He pointed a shaking finger.

"Look!"

Obscure amidst the lattice of sun and shadow, jogged a little band of riders, all Horse Flats men, and the last in the line was the black-bearded man who had called after Martin in town.

"Krantz," Martin whispered.

The deputy halted his horse. "Wait," he counseled.

Severn and Martin sat motionless. The Horse Flats men filed on and were all but lost among the trees. Then they

turned, and Severn knew that he and Martin had been seen. The riders angled across to the trail ahead of Severn and Martin. They turned again and came on straight toward the waiting two.

The deputy brushed back his coat, exposing his holstered gun. He shifted to one side, his weight resting almost wholly upon the left stirrup. He scanned the faces of the oncoming men and noted with a glòomy satisfaction that only two of the riders really counted, only two were dangerous. They were the black-bearded, middle-aged Otto Krantz who was a kind of leader among the hoemen and small ranchers of Horse Flats, and young Tom Bailey who had been a close friend of the dead Monahan. Krantz was in the fore now, the whole group swinging along with a grim, passionless rhythm.

Severn laid a hand on Martin's knee and felt the trembling of the little man. He spoke out to Krantz, his voice rising softly above the muffled thud of hoofs.

"Whoa," he said.

The black-bearded Krantz gazed at him steadily and made no check to his pace. He lifted his right hand, palm forward.

"We have somethin' to say," he answered. He spoke with a slight thickness, each word separately formed.

Severn sent his horse forward a step. "Whoa!" he said again.

This time, no more than twenty feet away, the Horse Flats men halted. Krantz brought his right hand down, directing a stubby finger at Martin.

"You!" he pronounced in his thick voice. "You will—"

"I'll tell him!" Tom Bailey surged up beside Krantz. He was a big man, muscled like a young stallion and with a wild glint in his eyes. "I'll tell the lyin' little Judas Iscariot!" he cried chokingly. He stretched forth a curling hand. "See this, Martin? Well, if I ever run across yuh again, I'll wring yore—"

"Shtop it!"

There was the bark of the drillmaster in Krantz's voice now. He grabbed Bailey's arm. Bailey fell sullenly silent. He shook off the restraining grip.

Otto Krantz nodded composedly. "That is better. Remember, we agreed. No trouble."

Severn spoke flatly. "There'll be no trouble, Otto."

Krantz's beady little eyes flicked contemptuously toward the deputy. "But you would like it, is it not so, Severn? You would like a chance to use your gun on one of us the way Jean Targen used his."

Severn started to reply, then changed his mind. Behind him he heard Martin's quick indraw of breath.

"Now look, Otto," Martin said, earnest-voiced, speciously calm, "I know what you and all the rest are thinkin'. But it ain't so. Just because . . . Well, when that lawyer got to twistin' me around and I—I— Well . . ." Martin's voice, weakening under the flinty contemplation of the Horse Flats men, died gaspingly away.

FOR a moment there was silence. Then, as if there had been no interruption, Krantz said:

"No, we are not here for trouble. It is to tell you something, Martin. You must leave at once. We do not want a man like you for a neighbor. We do not want to see you again."

"Yeah?" There was an attempt at bluster in Martin's tone. "And supposin' I don't want to leave? I got my rights!"

"No!" Krantz interrupted sternly. "A man like you has no rights. But we think of your wife and children. So we have agreed among ourselves. We will pay you fifteen hundred dollars for your land."

"So that's the game! Yuh want to squeeze me out!" Martin gave his high-pitched laugh. "Yuh're too late, Otto. I've already sold—for twenty-five hundred!"

"You idiot!" cried Severn. "Must yuh talk!"

Krantz was gently smiling. "Yes," he said, "he must talk. He is that kind. He has betrayed us, and now he betrays himself. Twenty-five hundred is a big price for his place. Too big. The man who paid that got something else for his money. There is only one man who—"

"Cole Devoe!" exclaimed Tom Bailey. He laughed harshly as he pointed at Martin. "Judas," he said, "has got his thirty pieces of silver."

There was a growl and a surging movement from the Horse Flats riders. Severn put his hand to his gun.

Krantz had swung quickly to face his companions.

"Remember," he said sharply, "we

have agreed." He looked toward Severn. "He is safe," he remarked in a quieter tone. "But he had better go now."

The deputy studied the black-bearded man, then slowly nodded. He spoke curtly to Martin.

"You won't be bothered. Start travelin'."

Martin moved forward. He cringed as he passed the Horse Flats men. He went on, disappearing in the shadowed silence of the pines. Severn guessed that he would never see the little man again. Tomorrow Martin would be pulling out. Behind him he was leaving rancor and unrest and the stalking threat of Devoe's gunman, Jean Targen.

Severn started to turn away, then paused. The Horse Flats men had not stirred. They were waiting for something. They regarded the deputy with stony eyes. Krantz indicated Severn's badge.

"We do not like that, Severn."

"What?" The deputy frowned, not understanding.

"On you," explained Krantz in his heavy way, "that badge is a lie. Jean Targen is Devoe's man. He pretends nothing else. You pretend to be a lawman. We do not like it."

"I see." Severn was sardonically amused. "Anything yuh want to do about it, Otto?"

Krantz nodded. "We have done it. Before we left town we spoke to Sheriff Trimble. He is a good lawman, but we cannot elect him again if he keeps a deputy like you. That is what we told him."

"And what did he say?" asked Severn.

Krantz shook his head composedly. "Nothing. But he will think about it. There was a time when Devoe could bring in gunmen like you and Jean Targen and run the county. Now it is different. There are more of us and we have votes. Sheriff Trimble knows that."

Severn glanced down at his law badge. His mind ran back to the day he had come here—the two years he had worked for Devoe.

"So yuh think Devoe brought me here?" he said, without heat. "Like Targen?"

"Would yuh deny it?" Tom Bailey reined up beside Krantz. His face was flushed and moist. He glared fiercely at Severn. "Who was it got yuh that deputy job?" he cried. "Wasn't it Devoe? Who was it that kept us from stringin' up Jean Targen? You did! You—"

"Shud up!" Krantz had whirled upon Bailey. "We agreed!" he shouted angrily. "No trouble! Now please shud up."

Bailey shrugged and was quiet. He continued to stare at Severn.

III

SEVERN returned Tom Bailey's stare, his eyes sharp and mocking. Bailey was moved by a personal antagonism that ran deeper than the rift between Devoe and the Horse Flats men. Severn knew it, and he guessed the others did, too. Then he heard Krantz speaking again.

"Yes," Krantz was saying, "I think Devoe brought you here. I think you have a reason for being here. Is it just to do Devoe's gun work? Or are you here for something else?"

The deputy looked at Krantz.

"And that," he replied with drawling emphasis, "is none of yore business. Would yuh like to make it yore business?"

"Yes!" roared Tom Bailey suddenly. "I'll make it my business! I want to know about that little place he bought over by North Pass. What did yuh want with it, Severn?"

"Be still!" ordered Krantz.

"I won't be still! Mebbe Devoe would be interested in knowin' the truth about the stock he's been missin'! Mebbe all of us would!"

"So now I'm a rustler?" Severn laughed harshly. "Am I workin' for Devoe or rustlin' from him? Make up yore mind, Tom."

Abruptly, without answering, Bailey charged forward.

"Shtop it!" yelled Krantz.

Big Tom Bailey didn't hear. He brought his horse to a plunging halt almost on top of the negligently waiting deputy.

"You and Jean Targen!" he cried furiously. "Devoe's butchers! Well, Targen will never gun down anybody else like he did poor Monahan! *I'll* see to that! And I'll take care of you, too! You—you—" For a moment wrath all but choked the big man. Then he bent toward the deputy, jabbing out his finger. In a venomously soft tone now he said: "And here's somethin' else for yuh. I know yore game with Alice Devoe. She's too—"

Harry Severn struck without warning. The flat smash of his palm across the man's mouth sounded like a whipcrack. Tom Bailey reeled backward. Severn left his saddle. His solid one-hundred-and-seventy-pound weight hit Bailey, and Bailey completed his somersault off his horse. Both men crashed to the ground.

Severn bounced to his knees. He gripped Bailey by the shirt and jerked him forward and punched him in the face. He released Bailey and swung savagely with both fists.

The big man tried to squirm away; he pawed wildly. He got his hand on Severn's wrist. Instantly his other hand was clutching the deputy. Severn struggled to get free. He was amazingly strong, big Tom Bailey was. He had the crushing embrace of a bear.

Severn rolled back and forth. He pumped his elbows to Bailey's ribs. Dimly he was aware of boots tramping close to him. He heard Otto Krantz's excited shouting. Abruptly Bailey transferred his grip to Severn's throat.

The deputy felt his eyes bulging. He was strangling; his chest was on fire. Desperately he tried to put his knees in Bailey's stomach. Then a weight landed heavily on his shoulder and at almost the same time Bailey relaxed his dreadful grip.

Someone pulled the deputy to a sitting position. His mouth was open, pulling in gasping draughts of air. His vision cleared and he gazed up into the hostile, threatening faces of the Horse Flats men. His hand went to his gun. The gun was gone.

"No, you don't!" someone growled, and both his arms were tightly clasped. There was no use struggling for he was helpless. The deputy sat quiet, breathing deeply, staring with dawning comprehension at the inert form of Big Tom Bailey. The black-bearded Krantz was bending over the unconscious man, holding a gun. Krantz, the deputy guessed, must have slugged Tom Bailey with the gun.

Krantz looked at the others. "It was necessary," he said regretfully. "We agreed. We wanted no trouble."

No one answered.

Krantz straightened and holstered his gun. He spoke sternly to the deputy. "You will leave before Bailey comes around. There will be no more fighting."

As Devoe reached the door he saw that someone had placed a bullet-hole between Jake Hogan's eyes. (Chap. XV)

He nodded to the men holding Severn. "Let him go now."

Severn's arms were released. He stood up and brushed off his coat.

"My gun," he murmured.

"No!" said someone.

"Yes!" said Krantz. "Give it back to him!"

SEVERN felt his gun slipped into its pouch.

Krantz gently shook his head. "I'm not afraid," he said. "I think you are a gunman. I am not a gunman, but I am not afraid. I think somewhere you are wanted by the law. I will try to find out about that. In the end we will get rid of you and Jean Targen and men like you. We will show men like Cole Devoe that they are not kings. Then this will be good country."

The deputy was silent. His wild anger was gone. He considered the black-bearded Krantz with grudging respect. Krantz, he decided, was pretty much of a man.

"You will go now!" said Krantz.

Severn nodded vaguely and moved toward his horse. As he swung into saddle, he saw that Tom Bailey was beginning to stir. The deputy paused.

"Otto," he called.

"Well?" Krantz glanced up coldly.

Severn pointed to Tom Bailey. "Keep him away from Jean Targen, Otto. He'll kill him. Jean will, I mean. Tom won't have a prayer."

"And what do you care?" Krantz raised his eyebrows. "Do you pretend now that you love Tom Bailey?"

The deputy shrugged. "No," he said wearily. "Forget it. Let him get killed if he wants to." He spat and rode stiffly away.

He left the Horse Flats trail and rode eastward. Here the deputy was on Devoe's range. Boxed D cattle grazed listlessly on the shadowed eastern slopes of the hillocks. A band of horses, tails and manes streaming, flowed over a ridge line ahead of him. Once, distantly, he glimpsed two of Devoe's riders. The riders waved before they passed from view.

To the north, near the notch in the steeply rising foothills, was Harry Severn's small cabin and few acres of grazing and woodland. He had bought the place cheaply from a departing homesteader. True, he never stayed there. In fact, the deputy hadn't even seen his place in the last month. Nevertheless, it was still there, and it was his. Ownership of land gave a man a feeling of solidarity. It was like having a nest-egg in the bank.

The sun dropped and rested warmly on the deputy's back and his thick shoulders. He rode slowly, his head bent in scowling meditation, thinking of young Tom Bailey. Also, he was thinking of Alice Devoe. Tom Bailey and Alice had just about grown up together. Severn had the uneasy feeling that Alice, despite all she said to the contrary, still liked Tom pretty well.

Severn lost his scowl. He pulled out the makings and rolled a cigarette. Actually, he guessed, he didn't need to worry much about competition from Tom Bailey. Tom wasn't likely to be around long. He would try to kill Jean Targen to avenge Monahan's death, and he would surely get a bullet for his pains. Exit young Tom Bailey!

The deputy's tough, dark features twisted in a faint grin. He had been raised in a hard school. You took advantage of the breaks. Otto Krantz had been right. It wasn't, he thought defiantly, any of his business if Tom wanted to get himself killed!

He puffed furiously for a moment, then pinched out his cigarette and tossed it away. He puckered his lips as if he had a bad taste in his mouth. Resolutely he stopped thinking about Tom Bailey.

Severn's horse moved more rapidly. The animal knew now where they were going. Below, sprawled on a gentle slope, was Cole Devoe's squat, L shaped ranchhouse and its numerous outbuildings.

Severn rode up and dismounted by the barn corral. He unsaddled and watered his horse and put it up in the barn, then went to the cookshack. A little old man with a whiskery monkey face appeared at the doorway.

The old man's name was Duffy and he had been with Cole Devoe a long time. He had a game leg and his temper was uncertain. Severn nodded to him cautiously, filled a basin and began washing.

Duffy spoke abruptly. "It ain't chow time yet."

"All right."

Severn emptied the basin and wiped

it out with a nearby roller-towel. He dried his face and hands on a handkerchief and ran his fingers through his heavy black hair.

"Of course," Duffy went on petulantly, "yuh might go up to the house and get a hand-out from Mrs. Fenner. If your stummick can stand that fancy grub of hers."

"I might at that," agreed the deputy. He brushed dust from his clothing.

DUFFY made a snorting sound. He had a feud on with Mrs. Fenner, Devoe's housekeeper. Duffy did not approve of her style of cooking.

"Probably," the old man grumbled, "yuh're goin' up to the house anyway. All that dudin' up!"

"Probably," said the deputy.

Duffy repeated the snorting sound. He stamped into the cookshack.

"Got some mulligan on," he called back angrily. "Probably, though, yuh're gettin' too fine-haired for man's grub these days."

Severn suppressed a smile. "Thanks, Duffy," he said humbly.

He went into the cookshack and sat down by the stove. Duffy ladled out a bowl of mulligan for him, poured a mug full of coffee. The coffee was so black it left a faint stain where it slopped against the mug.

"That," proclaimed Duffy, "is *man's* coffee!" He set a wedge of dried apple pie beside the mug.

While Severn ate, Duffy leaned upon a dough table and observed him with scowling disapprobation. Severn finished the last crumb of pie and drained the coffee mug. He patted his stomach.

"Now there," announced the deputy, "was man's grub!"

Duffy grunted. His scowl became less severe. It was plain he was pleased. He dragged out a corncob pipe.

The deputy rolled a cigarette. "Devoe back yet?"

"Uh-uh." Duffy shook his head. "Trial over?"

"Ought to be. I left before it wound up."

For a time the two smoked in silence.

"Martin switched his testimony," the deputy murmured then. "Says now Monahan drew first."

Duffy put away his pipe. A long glance of understanding passed between the two men.

"Martin," said Severn, "is pullin' out. He got twenty-five hundred for that little pea-patch of his. Twenty-five hundred!"

"What did yuh expect?" asked Duffy. "Devoe hired Jean Targen, didn't he? Did yuh expect he'd let 'em hang him?"

"I don't know what I expected." Severn looked down at his law badge. "Mebbe I let the shine of this thing get in my eyes."

"The law's all right," Duffy replied mildly. "Mebbe everything was all right. Mebbe Martin really did see Monahan draw first."

"Mebbe." The deputy gave a brief laugh. "I guess a man can see most anything when the price is right."

"Uh-huh. And the other way around, too."

"What?"

"How's Peg Teller?"

"All right; I reckon. I was talking to her this mornin'." The deputy frowned. "What's she got to do with it?"

"Just makin' my point clear," Duffy replied drily. "Sometimes a man can't see nothin' when the price *ain't* right."

Severn stood up angrily. "Some day, Duffy, yuh're goin' to say too much for yore good."

"No, I ain't. That's the fun of bein' old, Harry. Yuh can say what yuh want to and nobody won't hit yuh. I take advantage of it." The old cook grinned maliciously. "Think yuh're a pretty hard case, don't yuh, Harry? Well, yuh ain't. Yuh're just as human as anybody. What yuh scared of, Harry?"

"What!" Severn gave a start.

Duffy slapped his thigh delightedly. "Got yuh that time, Harry! I've watched yuh a lot, and I always figgered yuh was scared."

"You keep yore figgerin' to yoreself!" shouted Severn. He took a step forward.

Duffy calmly shook his head. "I won't, neither! And you can't make me! Me, I ain't scared of nothin' nor nobody. Not you or Jean Targen or Cole Devoe or—or—" The old cook's expression changed. "Yes, I am, too. Did yuh ever notice her eyes, Harry? Look at 'em close some time. Yuh can see the whites all around. They're glazed kind of like china."

The deputy turned toward the door. "I think," he said wearily, "that yuh're a little crazy, Duffy."

"Yeah? Well, I'll tell yuh somethin'. Cole Devoe's scared of her, too. What yuh think of that?"

The deputy laughed. "Yuh've got Mrs. Fenner on the brain, Duffy! Yuh think she's goin' to poison Cole?"

"Her? That old battle-ax! Who's talkin' about her?" Duffy snorted his disgust. "Yuh're too dumb to live, Harry. Well, mebbe yuh won't live long. . . . No, don't grin—I mean it! I mean it! I kind of like you, Harry, so I'm tellin' yuh. I've got a hunch that one of these fine days the boss will sick Jean Targen on yuh."

"Eh!" Severn sobered instantly. He leaned against the door jamb and rubbed his chin. "Now why," he asked curiously, "would Cole Devoe want to sick Jean Targen on me?"

"I didn't say Cole Devoe. I said the *boss!*"

IV

INTENTLY Severn gazed at Duffy. The old cook returned the stare. Then, abruptly, as if losing interest in the conversation, he went to the stove. He spoke casually above the rattling of a stove-lid.

"I hear Mrs. Devoe is comin' back from her visit East. Cole expects her tomorrow."

"That's nice." Severn kept rubbing his chin. Slowly he said, "It don't sound reasonable. Even if she did have somethin' against me, she wouldn't get . . . Why, great glory, Duffy! That's enough to raise the hair on yore head! The idea of a high-class woman like her getting Jean Targen to gun anybody!"

"I've been around here a long time," cut in Duffy. "I know some hair-raisin' things." He lowered his voice impressively. "I can tell yuh this, Harry—Cole Devoe is a haunted man. Him and her both. There's a spook they can't lay. I could tell yuh more, but I ain't goin' to."

The deputy was tactfully silent. He had the conviction that old Duffy needed a long rest.

Duffy nodded. "I know what yuh're thinkin'—I'm old and crazy. Mebbe I am. Don't pay no attention to *me!*" He banged the stove-lid in a show of rage. "Now get out of here! Git!"

The deputy left the cookshack, wondering if Duffy really were crazy. Crazy or not, the old man could make uncomfortable remarks.

Why had he mentioned Peg Teller? And why say he, Harry Severn, was scared? Actually, he wasn't scared—not the way old Duffy meant. Only sometimes there were things which a man would do better by not knowing. Sometimes there was a darkness of the past that it would be better to leave in the darkness.

"Forget it!" he thought angrily. "Forget what yuh came here for. It's a hard world. Take what yuh can get and let dead bones lie."

Shadows were growing longer. Two of Devoe's riders were loping in toward the barns. Another man was washing behind the cookshack and hesitated there, frowning morosely at the big ranchhouse.

The house was laid out in two low, wide wings, built of huge logs that had been dragged a long distance down from the mountains. Skilled workmen had erected the house, and it was a proper abode for a cattle baron. It would be pleasant, Severn was thinking, to own a ranch and house like this one. Very pleasant.

Well, why not? Cole Devoe couldn't last forever, could he?

The deputy lost his frown. He settled his coat and squared his shoulders. He strode forward.

At the front of the ranchhouse, where the wings joined, was a broad, roofed gallery furnished with tables and chairs. As Severn stepped up on the gallery, the house door opened and a girl popped out. Instantly Severn swept off his hat.

The girl was lean and fair. She had a demure, oval face, blue eyes and willful—and somewhat pouting—lips. She was nineteen years old and her name was Alice Devoe. She considered Severn with a mock severity.

"I began to think," she said, "that you weren't coming up to the house. I saw you ride up. Whatever were you doing all this time in the cookshack?"

Severn grinned. "Gettin' a hand-out. Yore father home yet?"

She shook her head and opened her eyes wide. "Sorry?"

"Well—" said Severn cautiously.

The answer seemed to satisfy her. She flashed him a smile and twirled on her heels.

"Let's go inside. It's cooler."

Severn followed her into the broad hallway and then into a living room. The room was large, oak-beamed, wainscoted with some dark wood and finished off with a dull white plaster. There were a few oil paintings of a uniform dreariness that did not appeal to the deputy, a crystal chandelier which he did admire, and a scattering of both heavy and fragile furniture. In one corner of the room was a piano which Alice played indifferently, and on top of the piano was a violin belonging to her brother, and which he played not at all.

At the girl's designation, Severn sat down gingerly on a ponderous settee. As always when in the presence of this moneyed grandeur, the deputy felt a measure of constraint.

ALICE sat down opposite him in a straight-backed needle-point chair and primly clasped her hands in her lap.

"How's sheriffing?" she asked companionably.

"Well—"

"It's not well at all!" she retorted. "D'you know how long it's been since you were out here? Over a week! When you were working for Father, you were right here. We could see each other every day."

"Well—" said Severn again. Alice had her moments of bluntness which he found a trifle disconcerting.

Abruptly her manner was serious. "How'd the trial come out?"

"I don't know—I left early. But I can guess. Martin switched his testimony. Give Jean a clean bill of health."

"Then Jean will get off."

"I think so."

The girl looked toward the window. She said, remotely, "Monahan, the man Jean killed, was a pretty good friend of Tom Bailey's."

"So I've heard."

"Do you think Tom will try to take it up now? I mean, will he try to start something with Jean Targen?"

"Mebbe. He'd better not. I don't know." Severn bent an intent glance upon the girl. She was still gazing toward the window.

"Tom used to come here a lot," she said in an expressionless voice. "We all liked him. But then when Father began to have trouble with those farmers coming in on Horse Flats, and Tom stuck up for them—well, that kind of ended it. I can't understand a man like that, turning against his own kind of people."

"Mebbe Tom likes farmers," said Severn.

"Well, I don't!" She swung toward him. "I hate a farmer!" she cried savagely. "Digging and building fences! Moving right in like they owned the country! And they always look so—so hungry. They look at you like a pack of wolves. I hate anyone that would stick up for them!"

Severn thought of the black-bearded Krantz. His throat still ached from Tom Bailey's strong, throttling fingers.

"Personally," he remarked feelingly, "I don't care for farmers, either."

The girl resumed her prim attitude. "See Bob in town?"

"Yore brother? Uh-uh. I guess he's there, though."

"I guess he is," Alice agreed acidly. "And hanging around Peg Teller, I bet. A common gambler's daughter! I don't know what Bob can see in her."

The deputy frowned. "Yuh're wrong there, Alice. Peg is mighty fine folks. It ain't her fault her father is a gambler. Peg's had a pretty tough life."

"I can believe that." Alice smiled sweetly. "You can almost tell it just by looking at her."

Severn was stiffly silent. The conversation was going sour.

As if aware of his mood, Alice abruptly changed her topic. She leaned forward.

"I wish, Harry," she said earnestly, "that Father would get rid of Jean Targen. Do you think you could say something to him about it?"

The deputy nodded soberly. "I had that in mind when I stopped here. I don't know how much good it will do."

"I—I'm scared of him, Harry. He's so soft-footed. He comes up on you when you never expect it. And the way he looks at you."

"Yeah? Jean ever bother you any, did he, Alice?"

"What?" The girl looked blank, then suddenly laughed. "Gracious, no! Not *that* way! I just mean that he looks at you so sly, like he's laughing at you all the time. And I think he and Bob are getting awful friendly. I don't like that. I don't know—" Alice broke off as if struck by a new thought. She gazed

obliquely at the deputy. "What would you do, Harry, if Jean did bother me?"

"That's somethin' that hasn't happened."

She gave a thrilled shiver. "Would you gun-fight him, Harry?"

"Stop that sort of talk!" Severn said sharply.

"I'll bet you could, Harry. Maybe not, though. The men say Jean is awful fast with a gun. I wouldn't want . . . You never talk about yourself, do you, Harry. About before you came here."

"No," said Severn.

She nodded wisely. "I'll bet you've done all kinds of things. I'll bet you could—" Alice looked around.

MRS. FENNER had appeared at the hall doorway. The tall, hatchet-faced housekeeper stared at Severn with chilling suspicion. Her thin nostrils twitched disdainfully. She quietly withdrew.

Alice made a face. "Old Nosey!" she whispered. She arose and tiptoed to the door and listened.

Presently Severn heard the clatter of a dish in the kitchen.

Alice nodded her satisfaction. She came toward the center of the room and paused there. She gave the deputy her oblique glance and looked down at her feet. Idly she drew a cross on the floor with the toe of her shoe. She didn't say anything.

The deputy remained stolidly on the settee. He considered the girl critically. She was young and undeniably pretty. Very young for her nineteen years.

Alice stopped her fidgeting. She laughed lightly and went to a picture on the far wall.

"Did you see this, Harry? It's a new one. Father just bought it."

Without enthusiasm he crossed the room to examine the picture. Alice stood so close she brushed against him. Abruptly Severn realized that it was not a new picture. This particular picture had been here a long time. He looked at the girl.

She smiled enigmatically. Her face was uptilted and her eyes were dreamy.

"Like it?" she murmured.

The invitation was plain. He guessed she wasn't so young after all. He gripped her shoulders and, for a brief moment, stood motionless. Then he kissed her roughly, angrily, and thrust her from him.

She sighed faintly. "I didn't know, Harry, that you—" She gasped and whirled away.

Someone was at the front door. Cole Devoe entered the room.

V

AS AN indication of his wealth, the cattleman wore a large ruby ring on his left hand. As a gesture toward his calling, he was shod in an old, run-down pair of riding boots. Beyond that, in his shabby gray suit, Cole Devoe might have passed for a small-town bank clerk.

He was slightly built and a trifle stooped. His features were pale and of a hawkish cast. His movements, as he came into the room, were briskly nervous.

He nodded curtly to the deputy. "Glad yuh're here, Harry. I wanted to see yuh. Come into the office." As an aside to the girl he said, "Tell Mrs. Fenner I already ate." He wheeled and left the room.

Severn got his hat from the settee and followed Devoe. When he looked back, Alice was moving toward the kitchen. She twiddled her fingers and blew him a kiss.

Devoe's office was across the hallway from the living room, a relatively small room furnished with several leather chairs, a bookcase, two desks—a roll-top and a table-top—and a dilapidated sofa. Harry Severn settled himself on the sofa. Devoe closed the door and held out a box of cigars.

"Smoke, Harry?"

Severn selected one of the fat black torpedoes with the proper feeling of reverence and anticipation; he had smoked Devoe's cigars before. Devoe took a cigar himself and sat down at the large table-top desk, facing Severn. There were two books on the desk, one on diseases of cattle, the other on public speaking. Devoe, so it was rumored, had political aspirations.

The cattleman lighted his cigar and spoke crisply.

"Sheriff Trimble tells me yuh took Martin home," he said. "Any trouble?"

"No-o. Otto Krantz came after us. He just talked. Martin will be leavin'. About tomorrow, I'd say."

Devoe nodded. "I expected that."

"Also," said Severn, "Krantz talked to me."

"I know. He had words with the sheriff about yuh. Wants yuh out of the sheriff's office."

"And he's right. I'm quittin' as deputy."

"Indeed? That I didn't expect!"

"Well, I am," Severn said stubbornly. "You got me the job in the first place, and Krantz and the rest think I'm your man. That puts Trimble right in the middle. He's a pretty good man and I like him, so . . . Well, I'm quittin'."

"I see. Then what are yuh goin' to do?"

Severn shrugged. "I'm not shore. Mebbe move out on the place I got near North Pass."

Devoe smiled. "Supposin'," he said, "I was to tell yuh confidentially that Sheriff Trimble ain't goin' to run for office this election. Would it make any difference about yore quittin'?"

Severn hesitated, then shook his head. "Nope. As long as I'm wearin' this badge, it puts Trimble in trouble. Folks will say—" Severn interrupted himself to stare suspiciously at Devoe. "I never heard Trimble say anything about not runnin' again."

"Nevertheless, it's true. We had a talk this afternoon and we decided—or rather, he decided that he was gettin' a little too old for the job. What we need here is a younger, a more aggressive man. A man, might I say, who has the broader, the more basic interests of the locality at heart." Devoe smiled again and blew a smoke ring.

The oratorical trimmings didn't fool Severn in the least. He knew exactly what Devoe meant. Devoe meant that he was kicking out Trimble because the sheriff was too conscientious about the rights of the Horse Flats hoemen. What Devoe wanted in office was a typical rangeland bully-boy.

"Yuh can't do it," Severn said flatly. "D'yuh know how many votes Otto Krantz can swing?"

Devoe moved his head pityingly. "Votes ain't everything. I think Mr. Krantz will find that out. There are certain things in politics that . . . The devil with that!" Devoe suddenly had lost his suavity. His voice crackled. "I *can* do it! And by thunder I *will* do it!" He jabbed his cigar at Severn. "Understand?"

The deputy didn't answer. When Devoe was in this mood, argument wasn't diplomatic.

DEVOE apparently expected no answer.

He leaned back and reflectively considered his cigar. "How old are you, Harry?"

"Twenty-five. Why?"

"How would yuh like to be our next sheriff, Harry?"

"I wondered if that was comin'." The deputy arose and strode to the window. He stood there, his back to the cattleman.

"No hurry, Harry." Devoe's voice ran out smoothly behind him. "Think it over. Remember, it's not a question of loyalty to Trimble. He's out, whatever yuh do. It's just a question of his age."

"I know." Severn gave a short laugh. "It's just a question of gettin' the right man to strong-arm the hoemen. Me an' Jean! By the way, how'd the trial come out?"

"Jean Targen was acquitted. Natural-

[*Turn page*]

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ly, when Martin unexpectedly retracted his charge."

"Save it, Cole," Severn broke in harshly. "I know just how unexpected it was—for you." He turned to face Devoe.

Devoe sprang from his chair, pointed a shaking finger at Severn. "You!" he cried out. "I know yuh! Where have I seen yuh before?"

"What?" Severn stared in amazement. He wondered if Devoe had suddenly taken leave of his senses.

Devoe dropped back into his chair. He passed a hand across his eyes and shook his head.

"Sorry, Harry," he said weakly. "It was yore side view. The way yuh were standin' at the window and when yuh turned around. I—I never did see yuh, did I? I mean somewheres before yuh came here?"

"No," said Severn. "Not that I know of."

Devoe fumbled in a desk drawer. He brought out a bottle and glass. "Drink, Harry?"

"No, thanks."

Devoe poured himself a slug of whisky and downed it. He wiped his lips and essayed a feeble smile.

"There are times," he said apologetically, "when yuh catch a resemblance in a person to someone yuh knew long ago. A common enough experience, I reckon, but sometimes it can be—well, kind of surprisin'."

Severn gazed curiously at the cattleman. He guessed that old Duffy was right, after all. Devoe *was* a haunted man. What ghost of the past was nagging at him?

"How old did yuh say yuh are, Harry? Twenty-five?"

"That's right."

Devoe dropped his gaze. He seemed to shiver. When he looked up again, his eyes were steady and controlled. He glanced at the door.

"Well, think over that sheriff job, Harry," he said crisply.

"How about Jean Targen? Are yuh goin' to keep him on?"

Instantly Devoe stiffened. "That's my business."

"All right. Here's another thing. Have yuh missed any cattle lately? Enough to show rustlin'?"

"No. What made yuh ask that?"

The deputy shrugged. "Nothin'. Just some talk I heard." He leaned both hands on the desk. "Yuh better get rid of Targen," he said in a low voice. "Who's next on the list? Otto Krantz? Yuh can't keep on buyin' off witnesses."

"Yuh forget yoreself!" cried Devoe angrily. "Any time I want advice from you, Harry, I'll—" Devoe paused. He smiled a bleak, thin smile. "No," he said clearly. "I am not goin' to get rid of Targen. If necessary, I'll hire more men like him." He held out a lean hand and slowly closed his fist. "What I have, I keep. What I want, I go after. Understand, Harry?"

"Yeah, I understand." Severn stuck on his hat and turned away.

There was a knocking at the door.

"Father! Ted Gamboy wants to see you." It was Alice's voice.

"All right," Devoe replied impatiently. "In a minute."

Severn waited with his hand on the latch, listening to Alice's retreating footsteps. He swung back toward Devoe.

"Yuh know," he said musingly, "I think I'll take a page out of yore book, Cole."

"So? What do yuh mean by that?"

"What yuh want, yuh go after. Don't be too surprised, Cole, if I try that myself." He opened the door and went out.

TED GAMBOY, Devoe's foreman, was standing in the hallway. He nodded coldly as Severn passed. The deputy left the house and went to the barn, brought out his horse and saddled it.

Jean Targen came to the corral. "Good-evenin', my friend," he said suavely, "I got free, yuh see. Where's yore congratulations?"

Severn ignored the gunman. He climbed into the saddle.

Targen laughed quietly. "Don't pull yore lawman's airs on me, Harry. We both work for the same man, don't we?"

The deputy glanced down at him. "Yuh think so?"

"Yep. And I've a feelin' it'll be a bad day for you when I stop thinkin' so."

"Or a bad day for you."

"It's possible," Targen agreed cheerfully. "In our trade we can expect the unexpected. Both of us know that. Take what comes, and forget what's past. Right, Harry?"

The deputy stared, then inclined his

head. "Yes," he replied harshly. "Yuh're right, Jean. Forget what's past!"

He moved off. Behind him he heard Jean Targen's sly laughter.

The sun had gone and dusk was settling. Severn rode slumped in the saddle, and scowling. The cigar Devoe had given him had long since gone out. He had worried the stump until it was a soggy, bitter brush. He flung it angrily away.

A rider was coming along the road toward him. The man bobbed his head in greeting.

"Stranger," he called, "this the way to Devoe's place?"

"That's right. Keep on."

The rider passed by. He was gaunt and long-limbed, and there was a white stubble on his sunken cheeks. Severn stared after him, a dull spark of memory flickering. Somewhere he had seen that angular, bony frame before. Somewhere before he had heard that unlovely, nasal voice.

The man glanced back over his shoulder. His face was no more than a blur in the deepening gloom. His horse *clip-clopped* steadily on. The road dipped, and horse and rider vanished.

Severn felt a prickling at the nape of his neck. He wheeled his horse to follow, changed his mind, and wheeled again. He kept on toward town.

"Yuh're crazy!" he told himself disgustedly. "Yuh're seein' things. Yuh're as bad as Devoe."

His hand moved behind him. Beneath coat and shirt his exploring finger-tips located faint welts across his back. The welts were the long-healed scars of a bull whip.

For a moment the deputy's features became savagely contorted, then he shook his head.

"No," he muttered. "It can't be. Not here. Not *him!* It's impossible!"

He reached in his pocket for tobacco sack and papers. With fumbling hands he tried to roll a cigarette.

VI

WHEN Harry Severn left the office, Cole Devoe sat quietly at his desk, staring emptily into space. Then he became aware that his foreman, Ted Gamboy, was still standing in the open doorway. The cattleman scowled.

"All right," he said. "Come in!"

Gamboy came in. "You sick?" he asked.

"Sick? No! I was just thinkin'." Devoe shook his head irritably. "What is it yuh want, Ted?"

Gamboy, a compactly built man of sixty with weather seamed features, had worked ten years for Cole Devoe. He was a good foreman, although at times his speech was a bit too blunt for Devoe's taste. This was one of the times when he chose to be blunt.

"Cole, are yuh goin' to get rid of Jean Targen?" he asked.

Devoe was equally blunt. "No!" he almost shouted.

"Wasn't that Severn that just came out of here?"

"Saw him, didn't yuh?"

Gamboy nodded composedly. "Yeah, I saw him. Mebbe I see more than you do, Cole." Gamboy's voice became earnest. "Get rid of 'em both, Cole. Don't keep neither Targen nor Severn hangin' around."

"Tarnation!" exploded Devoe. "How many are tryin' to run my business? You stick to handlin' cattle!"

"Sorry," said Gamboy without any particular apology in his tone. "I spoke out of turn. Cattle's what I come to see yuh about. Somebody's been doin' a little rustlin'."

"The devil! Severn just asked me about that!"

Gamboy showed interest. "What'd he say?"

"Not much. Just asked if we were losin' any. Is it bad?"

"Nope. Mebbe twenty head at a clip. Tom Bailey's the one who put me wise. Said he'd run across the tracks in the hills, and he told me so we wouldn't try to hang it onto the Horse Flats folks."

"Tom Bailey? Yuh believe *him?*"

"Far as I'm concerned," Gamboy retorted, "Tom Bailey is honest. I'd trust him anywheres."

"All right! All right!" Devoe cut in testily. "If there's rustlers, go after 'em. Take Jean Targen and—"

"Uh-uh." Gamboy shook his head. "No Jean Targen. I'll handle this rustlin' in my own way, or quit. That's final, Cole."

Devoe shrugged. Sometimes compromise paid dividends. Foremen as good as Gamboy didn't grow on every bush.

"All right," he said. "Handle it your own way, Ted. Any idea who it is?"

"No-o." There was an intonation there which caught Devoe's attention. He looked inquiringly at his foreman. "Mebbe," Gamboy murmured, "it might be just as well to let it slide this time. We can prob'ly stop it if we post a warnin' and let 'em know we're on to 'em."

"A warnin'? To rustlers? What yuh drivin' at, Ted?"

"Nothin' much." Gamboy shifted his gaze. "I was just thinkin' it might turn out to be some pretty good friend of yores."

"I don't care if it turns out to be my own grandmother!" Devoe stated warmly. "If there's rustling, go after who's doin' it! And get 'em! That's orders, Ted."

GAMBOY nodded. He turned toward the door.

"Just a minute, Ted." Devoe gave a nervous laugh. "I've been wonderin' . . . Yuh mentioned Severn. Do yuh know anything about him?"

"No," said Gamboy. "He worked here under me two years and he ain't lazy—I know that much." His voice became faintly malicious. "I figgered you knew somethin' about him, seein' yuh got him his law job."

Devoe lowered his gaze. He decided to let the last remark pass.

"Sometimes," he said reflectively, "I get the notion that Severn didn't just drift in here, that mebbe he had a reason."

"I've had that notion a long time."

Devoe looked up. "Did he ever drop a hint?" he asked eagerly. "Ever give yuh any idea what he was after?"

"No," said Gamboy. "How'd he know we were losin' cattle?"

"I don't know. Said he heard it."

"The rustlers do their drivin' toward North Pass, past that little place of Severn's," said Gamboy.

Devoe frowned. "And yuh think he's in on it?"

Gamboy hesitated, then shook his head. "No-o. I reckon not. It's possible—but I don't think so."

Devoe's face cleared. "I don't, either. Somehow I can't imagine him runnin' off a few head of cattle. If he went after anything, it'd be bigger game than that."

Gamboy gave him a peculiar glance. "Yeah," he agreed, "I believe it would be. Well, if it does turn out that way, don't forget you're the one that keeps him hangin' around." Gamboy then left.

Devoe poured himself another slug of whisky. He clasped his hands behind his head and gazed ruminatively at the ceiling.

Cole Devoe would have liked to think of himself as a self-made man. Actually, he was not. There was a large element of luck in his success and wealth.

Cole Devoe's luck had struck, somewhat like lightning, nearly a quarter of a century ago when a Brinker City stage was caught and overturned by a roaring flash-flood out of Black-hole Canyon. In the stage were a whisky drummer with the improbable name of Hoppelscoot, and a Mrs. Jason Porter and her infant son, Jason Porter, Jr.

A rescue party pried the drowned bodies of Hopplescoot and Mrs. Jason Porter out of the wrecked coach. A month afterwards the body of Jason Porter, Jr., was found, and identified, six miles down canyon from the scene of the smash-up.

Two weeks more, and lightning struck again. Jason Porter himself died of pneumonia.

At the time Cole Devoe had been Porter's cattle foreman. Porter had a liking for Devoe and great confidence in the younger man's ability and integrity. Porter's will—a holograph, and drawn up before the stage disaster—made that plain. He named Cole Devoe administrator for his estate which was divided between Porter's wife and son. A paragraph of it read:

> And in the event of the decease of my son Jason Robert Porter prior to his majority, and/or the decease of my wife Mary Christine Porter prior to the day when my son Jason Robert Porter attains his majority, I then name the aforementioned Cole Howard Devoe as heir to that division of my property which shall revert to the estate.

Even today, if he concentrated, Cole Devoe could quote verbatim from the involved, pseudo-legal phraseology of Porter's self-composed will. He should have been able to. The will—that and the wreck of the stage—had made him a rich man.

Generally Devoe preferred not to examine too closely into the past. He preferred to keep his thoughts on a daily basis. There were times, though, when the mind played odd tricks on a man. Such as today when Harry Severn had

turned from the window with the light behind him. Strange, the fleeting resemblance Devoe had noted, as if the past suddenly had taken on formidable substance. Pure fancy, of course, but—but disquieting.

"Father?"

"Eh!" Devoe jerked around. He saw Alice in the doorway.

"Father, did Harry say anything to you about me?"

Mentally, as he had done many times in the past few years, Devoe noted that his daughter was growing up. She was becoming a remarkably pretty young woman. He smiled indulgently.

"And what would Harry say about you, my dear?"

"Nothing, I guess." Alice entered the office slowly. "I just thought he might have. I was talking to him before you came home."

"So yuh were. I remember." Devoe shook his head. "I'm not so shore I approve of that, Alice. These unchaperoned talks with—with . . . Well, with a man like Harry. After all, yuh're not a child any more."

"I think he realizes that—now. You like him, don't you?"

"I suppose so. But—"

Devoe drummed his fingers on the desk top. Why did all conversation seem to turn to Severn?

"When is Mother coming home?" asked Alice. "Tomorrow?"

Devoe nodded. He stopped drumming his fingers.

"Poor Daddy!"

"What?"

"You heard me," said Alice softly. "Poor all of us! Did you ever really love her, Daddy?"

DEVOE stared at his daughter in shocked speechlessness.

Calmly, and before Devoe could protest, she had picked up the whisky bottle from the desk and taken a swallow.

"Alice!" cried the horrified Devoe.

She took another swallow and set the bottle down.

"Sometimes," she said huskily, "it helps, doesn't it, Father? Incidentally, I lied to you. I wasn't talking to Harry Severn when you came in—I was kissing him."

"Yuh *what!*"

Devoe forgot all about the whisky. He wondered if he was hearing aright. He gripped the desk.

"Do you mean, Alice," he asked in a deadly quiet tone, "that Harry Severn dared lay a hand on you?"

"Not at all. I said *I* was kissing him. Harry didn't have much to do with it." She smiled coolly. "I'm a lot like you, Father. I go after what I want."

Devoe pulled himself erect. "Alice, yuh must be mad! If I believed for one minute that you—"

"Stop it!" Alice interrupted harshly. She made a pushing gesture. "Sit down, Father. Don't try preaching. How about the house on Plummer Street?"

Devoe drooped, limply. He crouched back in his chair.

"How," he whispered, "did you know about that?"

"I know. Don't worry. I won't tell. At least, I don't think I will. But don't—let—anything—happen to Harry Severn."

The girl's gaze was stony; her face was coldly masklike. Almost Devoe was convinced that he was in the presence of a stranger. Suddenly her gaze relented. She rushed to his side and rested her soft cheek against his.

"Is it hard to realize that I'm grown up?" she murmured.

Feebly Devoe tried to push her away. "Alice, I don't know what to think."

"Yes, you do. I'm your daughter. Whatever else we are, whatever happens, you're my father, and I'm your daughter."

Devoe closed his eyes. His thoughts were incoherent. He felt as if he were being drawn into some chill, black morass. He reached desperately for his daughter's hand.

"Yes," he responded in a low voice. "Yes, Alice."

"Poor Daddy," she repeated.

She kissed him lightly and stepped back. Devoe heard her leave the office. . . .

Cole Devoe finally aroused himself. He lifted his head from the desk. The office was gloomy. Mrs. Fenner was lighting the lamps in the hallway. She stood at the office door, a taper in her hand.

"Come in," said Devoe. His tone was clipped, controlled.

Mrs. Fenner came in and lighted the office lamp.

Devoe took thought of his son. "Bob home?" he asked.

"Not yet. Alice is in her room. Said she didn't feel so good." Mrs. Fenner started to leave, but paused. "It's tomorrow Mrs. Devoe is coming home, isn't it?"

"So she wrote me."

Mrs. Fenner's lips were primly thinned. "How long's she going to stay this time?"

"I don't know," Devoe replied coldly.

Mrs. Fenner's lips became even thinner. She seemed about to speak, and then to think better of it. She went out.

VII

DEVOE settled himself in his chair and opened his book on public speaking. He found it tough going. The printed words had a tendency to run together and blur. Determinedly, like a a man bucking snowdrifts, Devoe charged again and again at each paragraph until he had the sense of the thing. He looked up. Mrs. Fenner had returned.

"There's a man out back to see you, Mr. Devoe. He says it's important."

Devoe closed his book and scowled. "Who is it?"

Mrs. Fenner sniffed. "A range tramp, I'd say. He said to tell you his name is Hoppelscoot. I never heard such a name."

Devoe was not aware that he had risen, nevertheless, he was now standing.

"What was that name?" he asked unbelievingly.

"Hoppelscoot. But if you ask me, I think—" Mrs. Fenner began to back away. "Why, what's the matter, Mr. Devoe? Are you sick?"

"No!" Devoe interrupted grimly. "I'm not! I'm perfectly all right!" He smiled to prove it. "Mebbe," he said, "I might see him. What an odd name! Bring him in, Mrs. Fenner."

Mrs. Fenner nodded. She looked frightened. She left hastily. Devoe sat down weakly. Ordinarily he was a man of great self-possession. But he had received so many jolts this evening. And now— And now, what? He composed his features and waited.

The man who appeared at the office doorway was indeed a range tramp. His garb, his whole demeanor proclaimed it. He was tall and angular. His cadaverous cheeks were host to a bristling gray stubble. His dark, deep-pitted eyes were wary and cunning.

"Yore name's Hoppelscoot?" Devoe asked sharply.

"Naturally it ain't." The man's speech was unpleasantly nasal. "But it's a name I knowed you'd remember. I figgered if I told the woman that, you'd see me." He winked hugely. "Right?"

"Set down!" Devoe's voice crackled.

The man jumped, then. With a vast show of assurance, he entered the office and seated himself.

Devoe stood up. "Wait here. I'll be back in a minute."

"Hold on there now! You ain't goin' to dodge me, eh?"

"I said," repeated Devoe frigidly, "that I'd be back. Wait!" He left the office and closed the door.

In the hallway Devoe moved swiftly. He went to the front door and looked out. One of his riders was sauntering by. Devoe rushed to the edge of the gallery.

"You!" he called guardedly. "Go find Jean Targen and send him here. Hurry!"

The rider started running toward the bunkhouse.

Devoe paced nervously to the far end of the gallery. He rubbed his palms on his coat and peered into the night.

"Yuh wanted me?" Targen's voice spoke almost in Devoe's ear.

The cattleman gasped and whirled. He gripped the pudgy gunman by the arm.

"Listen, Jean! There's a man in my office. I want yuh to have a good look at him when he leaves. If yuh can hide yoreself somewheres in the hall it'll be best."

Targen held up a hand. "Let's go," he said briskly.

Devoe led the way into the hall. He trod heavily to cover the sound of Targen's footsteps. He could have saved himself the effort, for Jean Targen was a man who had mastered the art of silence. When Devoe reached his office door, he glanced back. Targen had vanished.

A hanging coat stirred on the big oak coat-rack opposite him. A soft chuckle came out of the lamp shadow there.

Devoe smiled faintly and nodded. He

squared his shoulders and went back into his office. He carefully shut the door.

Devoe's visitor had discovered the whisky. As Devoe came into the office, the fellow eyed him with solemn impudence and put the bottle to his lips. Devoe resumed his seat behind the desk.

The whisky bottle banged down. "Ha!" said the man. He wiped his lips and bent forward. "Yuh know me, Cole?"

Devoe built a steeple with his fingers. "No," he said.

"Think, Cole. Near thirty year ago, before yuh worked for Jay Porter. The old Yocum gang. You and me and . . . *Now* d'yuh know me?"

"Mebbe. Yuh must be—"

"Jake Hogan. *Old* Jake Hogan now!"

Devoe nodded pleasantly. "Thirty years is a long time."

JAKE HOGAN scowled. It was evident that he had expected some violent display of emotion on Devoe's part—dismay, or perhaps even fear. Inwardly Devoe smiled. Outwardly he was impassive.

Jake Hogan took another swig of whisky. "Done right well for yoreself, ain't yuh, Cole?" he said sneeringly.

"I've no complaints."

Hogan grinned and leaned back. Apparently he now had decided to take his cue from Devoe. He waved a hand largely and intimately.

"Got it all from Porter, didn't yuh? I heard about it after I left these parts, about that and the stage-coach accident. That happened just the day before I left. Shore too bad, wasn't it, Cole?"

"Yes," said Devoe. "It was plumb unfortunate."

"That's where I heard that Hoppelscoot name. I figgered yuh'd remembed it."

"Yes," said Devoe. "Anybody would remember that name."

Hogan frowned reflectively. "Cole, what was that nurse gal's name that was workin' for Porter? The one that identified his kid after they found him below Black-hold Canyon. Wasn't it Minerva Suttler? One of them Injun-wild Suttlers, wasn't she?"

"I believe that was her name."

Hogan grinned again. He reached for the bottle. "Married her, didn't yuh, Cole? That's what I heard."

Devoe was icily silent. He watched the draining of the bottle.

"Ha! That's good! Best I've had in a long time." Hogan lugubriously shook his head. "I've been in the pen, Cole. Eight mortal years of it, Cole. I've had it turrible rough."

"Yeah?"

"And here you are livin' off the fat of the land! I even hear yuh're thinkin' of runnin' for Congress. I shore hope nothin' interferes with yore plans, Cole. I shore do, Cole."

"And now," commented Devoe drily, "we're gettin' down to business. A little blackmail, eh?"

"Blackmail!" Hogan looked pained. "Did I say—"

"Shut up! I know what yuh're after!" Devoe pointed a finger. "Now listen to me. And listen careful, Jake. If yuh ever open yore mouth about the old Yocum gang to anybody—to anybody, mind yuh!—it's going to be an unlucky day for you. Mighty, mighty unlucky, Jake."

Jake Hogan glowered, then his gaze shifted. "Cole," he protested whiningly, "yuh ain't got me right."

"Oh, yes, I have. I've got yuh exactly right. Yuh're a sneakin', lyin' crook, and yuh always were. But for old times sake I have to give yuh a hand."

Devoe arose abruptly and went to his little office safe.

"A thousand, Cole, and yuh'll never see me again," Hogan's nasal voice sounded hopefully behind him.

"Yuh're a liar," Devoe answered promptly. "I know what's on yore mind. Right now yuh get two hundred. Or I might raise that . . . By the by, Jake, wasn't yuh married when yuh left here?"

"Yuh know I was," said Hogan sullenly.

"And yuh had a child, too, so somebody told me. I s'pose yuh took yore family with yuh?"

"Yeah, I took 'em both along." Hogan's tone was cautious now. "We went part way to Californy with a wagon train."

Devoe nodded vaguely. He was busy counting money.

"Two hundred—two fifty," he muttered. "Where's yore wife now, Jake?"

"Dead. Fifteen year ago."

Devoe nodded again. "Three hun-

dred," he muttered. "Three hundred and—" He hesitated and glanced behind him.

Jake Hogan's eyes were craftily narrowed. "Why don't yuh ask it, Cole?" he inquired gently.

"Ask what?"

"Nothin'." Hogan laughed. "Smooth, ain't yuh, Cole?"

Devoe kicked shut the safe. "Here," he stated coldly, "is three hundred dollars. Now get out."

He strode to the door. From the other side of the door he thought he detected the faintest rustling of sound.

Hogan slowly stuffed the money into his pocket. His expression was thoughtful. Suddenly, as if becoming aware of Devoe's sharp gaze, he jumped to his feet. He seemed anxious now to go.

Devoe escorted Hogan to the front door. Hogan moved off into the night. His footsteps lagged and his nasal voice carried back through the dark:

"Why didn't yuh ask that question, Cole? Why didn't yuh?"

He laughed softly and went on.

FOR a moment Devoe stood as rigid as iron, staring after Jake Hogan. Then he closed the front door and turned. Jean Targen was waiting in the hallway behind him.

Targen had a small parrot mouth, round cherubic eyes and rosy cherubic cheeks that no amount of exposure would tan. His hands were small and graceful. Sometimes, on a bet, he would use his seemingly delicate hands to rip a deck of cards in two. In many respects Jean Targen was a deceptive man in appearance.

Devoe eyed him with some reserve. He suspected that Targen had been listening at the door while he had been talking to Jake Hogan.

Targen's return gaze was ironically amused. "Well," he said, "I had a good look at him. I'll know him again. Want him killed?"

Devoe jumped. "Tarnation!" he cried angrily. "Is that all yuh think about? Killin' somebody?"

"No," replied Targen seriously. "I think of lots of things."

"Did I tell yuh to kill Monahan?" Devoe persisted, still angry. "Did I ever tell yuh to kill anybody? Did I?"

"Nope. Not in so many words yuh didn't. Yuh're plumb careful about that." Targen shook his head commiseratingly. "A conscience must be an awful lot of bother."

Devoe glared at the gunman. There were times lately when Targen showed signs of getting out of hand. Perhaps it might be a good idea to get rid of him.

"Well?" said Targen impatiently. "What *do* yuh want?"

"Nothin'!" Devoe answered curtly. "At least"—he frowned and brushed his palms against his coat—"not right now. Later mebbe, Jean. If yuh should happen to run into that man some—"

"Not another word!" Targen held up his hand. "Yuh ain't said a thing, Cole. And I ain't either. Right?"

The two men looked at each other. Targen smiled. Devoe uncomfortably dropped his gaze.

"Right," he muttered weakly. "And—and when yuh go out Jean, have somebody saddle Star for me."

Targen nodded. He started to leave.

Devoe cleared his throat. "Jean! Just a minute. Jean, what do you think of Harry Severn?"

"Oh, ho!" Targen raised his eyebrows. "That job will cost yuh money, Cole."

"There yuh go again! All I asked yuh was for yore opinion."

"I know what yuh asked me. And I told yuh—that job is goin' to cost yuh money. *That's* what I think of Harry Severn!"

Devoe turned away. "Don't forget about Star," he said.

Targen left by the front door. A few minutes later Devoe, wearing a hat, left the house by the rear door. He found his horse, Star, saddled and waiting at the corral. Devoe climbed aboard.

A horseman came around the corner of the barn and pulled up with some evidence of surprise. Devoe recognized his son, Bob.

VIII

YOUNG BOB DEVOE was twenty-one years old, a larger man than his father and less finely molded.

"Dad?" he queried, as he recognized the horseman. "Where yuh goin'?"

"On business," Devoe replied shortly. "Where've *you* been?"

"Town," said Bob reluctantly. "I . . . Dad, I wonder if you could let me have

a little money. I'm flat."

"Money!" exploded Devoe. "That's all I hear from you—money! If yuh'd stay away from town yuh wouldn't be so flat. Yuh know what I was doin' when I was yore age?"

"Yes," said Bob wearily. "Yuh've told me often enough. Yuh were a twenty-a-month cowboy."

This was not strictly accurate, but Devoe let it pass. Actually, at twenty-one, Devoe had been doing a little high-class rustling with the old Yocum gang.

Bob sighed. "Can't yuh let me have some, Dad? Not much."

"No!" said Devoe. "Now you get in the house!"

Devoe moved off. His son was a disappointment to Devoe. There was an indecisiveness in Bob's make-up which Devoe could not account for. He himself, he was sure, possessed no such weakness, nor—and this was certainty!—did the boy's mother. Devoe smiled grimly as he thought of his iron-willed wife. Inadvertently he kneed his horse.

The horse — quarter-strain racing stock—bounded forward. With a sort of reckless abandon Devoe loosed the reins. He went roaring through the night, headed for Brinker City.

When Cole Devoe reached town, he avoided Main Street and turned down Plummer Street. Here was a scattering of residences and no business house of any description. It was somber and quiet. Devoe glanced about with an air of furtiveness. The hoofbeats of his horse seemed embarrassingly loud.

Before one of the houses—white-painted and two-story—he dismounted. He led his horse along a short driveway and stabled it in a carriage shed. He went to the rear door of the house, tried the knob, knocked, and then stabbed a key into the lock. He entered the house and locked the door behind him.

Pushing forward through the darkness, he saw a lamp approaching from the front end of the house. The lamp was shielded in the hands of a young Negress. The girl's eyes rolled whitely above the yellow flame.

"That you, Mistah Devoe?" Before Devoe could answer, she had thrown back her head and was shrieking: "Mistah Devoe's heah! Mistah Devoe!"

Devoe leaped nervously. "You shut up!" he snarled.

He brushed by the girl and mounted a carpeted stairway, two steps at a time.

At the top of the stairs was a lighted doorway. Devoe passed through and shut the door. He sank down on the edge of a chaise longue.

The room in which Devoe now found himself was a bedroom, or as the owner preferred to call it, a boudoir. There was soft illumination from two rose-shaded lamps, a congestion of furniture and lace-bedecked pillows, a gilded French clock, and the smell of perfume.

The woman in the room, clad in a blue satin kimono, was seated before a pier-glass dressing table which was littered with cosmetic containers of varying shapes and colors, a silver handmirror and powder box, nail scissors, a handkerchief box, and a large, heart-shaped pin-cushion. She was rubbing some kind of lotion into her cheeks.

Her name, for formal uses, was Mrs. Eugene Cummings. In strict truth, there was not and never had been a Mr. Eugene Cummings. Devoe knew her as Fern Kemp.

Fern was fifty years old and proud of her snow-white hair. She also was proud of her juvenile features and smooth, baby-pink complexion. A wrinkle was something to be attacked with ruthless diligence, as she was attacking now. Her figure, striking a happy balance between white hair and baby complexion, was that of a vigorous and lushly rounded young woman.

FOR a moment after Devoe's unceremonious entrance Fern slowly went on rubbing her cheeks while she looked at him in the pier-glass. Then she wiped off the lotion with a cloth and swung around.

In a low voice Devoe said: "I just saw Jake Hogan."

"What?" Fern bounced erect. "No!"

"Yes," said Devoe. "He was at the house."

Belatedly he remembered to remove his hat. He flicked dust from the crown and deposited the hat carefully in a waste-basket.

Fern gazed at him searchingly. She crossed the room and sat down beside him. She put her arm around him. At the soft contact Devoe's nerves began to scream. He clenched his hands together.

"Madam," he exclaimed in a dramatic whisper, "the tombs are openin'!

The past rises about us. The graves give up their dead!"

"Stop it! Get a hold on yourself!" Fern gave him a shake and pushed slightly away from him. "Want a drink?"

"No. I—I don't think so." Devoe straightened and unclasped his hands. He pumped up a smile. "Sorry, Fern."

She nodded. "That's better. Now what did Jake want?"

"Blackmail. That old Yocum gang business."

"What else?"

"Nothin' else. Anyway, he didn't mention anything else."

"Do you think he knows? You do, don't you?"

"I don't know what to think, Fern. He left here with his wife and the child. They headed west somewhere. His wife died."

"And?" prompted Fern.

Devoe clasped his hands again. "I don't know," he whispered. "That's all I could get out of him. I—I don't know."

Fern frowned. She tugged at her lower lip.

"He's sly, Fern. I had to be careful. Just a hint is all he'd need. I didn't dare ask too many questions."

"No, of course not." She gestured contemptuously. "That Yocum gang thing is nothing."

"No," said Devoe. "I know that. It's so long ago. A little rustlin'—what's that? Everybody did it in those days."

"What did you say to Jake?"

"I gave him a few hundred."

"He'll be back again."

"Shore. It's one way of keeping tabs on him."

"Smart," murmured Fern. A hard edge came into her voice. "If he does get troublesome, there's always one way left to get rid of him, isn't there? One *good* way."

"Fern!"

"Might as well say it as think it. It could be managed easily enough, couldn't it?"

Devoe glanced down at his hands. "Mebbe. But I don't like it."

"Then what a r e you worrying about?"

"Nothin' I reckon." Devoe drew a deep breath. "I'm afraid I'm not myself tonight, Fern. There's been so much today—the trial and then Severn stopped in and. . . . Do you know how old Harry Severn is?"

"No," said Fern.

"Twenty-five. Does that suggest anything to yuh?"

"Yes," said Fern. "It suggests that you'd better go home and get to bed. You *are* jumpy!" She patted his hand. "Your hat is in the waste-basket, darling."

Irritably Devoe fished out his hat and jammed it on his head. He stood up, scowled at Fern, then took a packet of money from his pocket. He tossed the money on Fern's lap.

"What's that for?"

"I may not see you for a while. Minerva comes home tomorrow."

"Oh-h." Her expression was flatly blank. "For how long?"

Devoe compressed his lips and slowly shook his head.

HER gaze moved to the money but she didn't touch it. She smiled faintly.

"You know," she said, "I used to think that was the most important stuff in the world."

"Well?"

"I've been a confidence woman, card sharp and just about everything."

"No need to go into that, Fern."

"Yes, there is. I want to. Six years ago I came here to blackmail you. I was no better than Jake Hogan. Maybe I'm no better now. Maybe I'm just younger. Sounds crazy, don't it, Cole? But it must be true, because money don't seem so important to me now. That *is* being young, isn't it, Cole?"

He frowned uneasily. "I never saw yuh like this before, Fern."

"That's because you never saw me so young before. Don't try to understand it, Cole. I'm not sure I understand it myself." Fern arose, and the money fell to the floor. She lifted her arms, and her green eyes were oddly intent. "Good night, Cole."

He reached for her, gripped her hard. "I'm not a bad man, Fern," he said shakily. "Not really bad. But—"

"Good or bad," she murmured. She kissed him and pushed away.

Devoe settled his coat. The past had retreated and fear was now a vanished wisp of smoke.

"But," he went on harshly, "what I have, I keep! I've had it too long now to give it up without a fight."

"Yes," said Fern gently. "Good or bad—it's all the same. Good night, Cole." She opened the door. "Tess!" she called. "Show Mr. Devoe out."

Devoe left the room. The Negro maid was waiting at the bottom of the stairs with the lamp.

IX

JUST about the time Cole Devoe left Fern's home, Harry Severn had a visitor. The stocky deputy was in his room at the Brinker City Hotel. He was seated in a chair, his feet propped on the bed, his gaze upon the lamp reflection on the dark window pane. His thoughts were not pleasant. He was thinking of the gaunt, nasal-voiced stranger he had met on the road from Devoe's place.

He was startled by the light knock on the door; he had heard no footsteps in the hall.

"Come in," he said irritably.

The door opened and a man slipped into the room. Severn stared. The man was Jake Hogan. Severn's feet thumped to the floor. His face twisted in cold ferocity. He started to arise. Hogan threw up a warding hand.

"Wait!' he pleaded. "Don't do nothin' yuh'll be . . . Harry! Wait!" His voice climbed frantically.

Severn checked himself. He sat down again. Quietly enough he said:

"So it was you, after all."

"It's me, Harry. Did I scare yuh, son?"

"Don't call me that."

"All right. Anything yuh say, Harry." Hogan sidled forward, perched gingerly on the edge of the bed. "Didn't yuh know me, Harry, when yuh seen me on the road? I thought I knowed you, even after all these years. Yuh've shore growed to be a man, Harry!"

"How'd yuh find me here?"

"Easy. I seen that badge on yore coat when we met, so I asked in town who was deputy here and where he was stayin'. Call yoreself 'Severn' now, eh?"

"Yes. I like it better'n Hogan. I'd like any name better'n Hogan."

Hogan sighed. "It ain't easy raisin' a young one, Harry. Mebbe I was a mite harsh on yuh, but I meant it for the best. And when yuh pulled out after the old woman croaked, I—"

"Don't call her that!"

"What?"

"I said not to call her that. She was the only mother I ever knew. She saved me from more than one of yore drunken beatin's."

Hogan shook his head mournfully. "Likker was my failin', Harry. I tried to be a father to you, but it got the best of me."

"Father!" Severn gave a barking laugh. "Yuh know how hard I'm workin' to keep my hands off yuh?"

"Now, now!" Hogan made a quick, pacific gesture. "Yuh ain't holdin' a grudge *that* long, Harry! This ain't much of a welcome—"

"Yuh bet it ain't! What're yuh after? Money?"

"No, sir! I just wanted to see yuh again, Harry."

"A lie, of course. How'd yuh know I was in these parts?"

"I didn't," replied Hogan earnestly. "So help me, I didn't! I never knowed till I seen yuh tonight."

"Probably another lie. What're yuh doin' here then?"

"Business, Harry. Just a little business. But now that we've run into each other, it's goin' to be big business." Hogan winked. "For both of us, Harry."

Severn pointed to the door. "Get out," he said wearily.

"Uh-uh. You got to listen, Harry. . . . Now wait! Yuh'd like to know who yore pa is, wouldn't yuh, Harry?"

"What!" Severn gripped the chair. "What'd yuh say?"

Hogan grinned slyly. "Uh-huh. I figgered that'd get yuh. All right, now listen. You know how yuh came to me in the first place. Yore ma brought yuh to my cabin one rainy night twenty year ago."

"Her name was Fern Kemp," said Severn in a low voice.

Hogan gave a start. "Who told yuh that? I never did! Did the old wo—Did Sara tell yuh?"

"That's right. The night before she died."

Hogan scowled. "Ain't that just like a woman! She made me promise never to tell. She said it wouldn't do yuh no good to know that a woman like that was yore ma. Oh, well." He shrugged. "That part don't matter. Now, d'yuh know *why* she left yuh at my cabin?"

"Yes," said Severn. "She'd shot somebody in a gamblin' hall. The sheriff was

after her, and she couldn't be burdened with me."

"Right — partly right, Harry. But there was another reason she left yuh with me. It's somethin' the old—that Sara didn't know about. And naturally I didn't tell her. Can't yuh guess the reason, Harry—the special reason!—why yore ma picked *me* out to leave yuh with?"

SEVERN didn't answer. He gazed at that lank, nasal-voiced, unlovely figure of a man perched on his bed, and he didn't speak.

"Can't yuh guess why, Harry?"

Suddenly Severn felt the blood leave his face. "No!" he cried out. "It's a lie!"

"No, it ain't. It's gospel truth. I'm yore pa, Harry." He came around and patted Severn on the shoulder. "Harry—"

"Don't," muttered Severn. He sat slumped and inert.

"I didn't mean nothin', Harry." Hogan stood there with fumbling hands, looking down at the deputy. His cadaverous features twitched in self-pity. "I know I ain't so much, Harry," he said brokenly. "But when a man's own pa comes to him—yore *old* pa, Harry—" His voice whined off into silence.

The deputy shuddered. Abruptly he arose. He strode to the center of the room and halted, his back to Hogan. "What is it yuh want?" he asked hoarsely.

"Nothin' much, Harry. I ain't beggin'. But I've had it turrible rough lately. I ain't well, Harry. If you could find me a place where I could stay a while and kind of rest up."

"All right. I'll tell yuh a place. Take the road toward North Pass—that's the road yuh met me on this evenin'. Just as yuh come to the foothills yuh'll cross a little creek. About a quarter mile on yuh'll see a kind of trail—just old wagon tracks—comin' in from the left. Foller 'em and yuh'll find an old shack and barn. Yuh can stay there. No one'll bother yuh. I own the place."

"Can I get supplies anywheres this late at night?"

"Try Hanley's saloon. He keeps supplies. Need any money?"

"I could shore stand some, Harry. I ain't got a cent."

"Here." Severn held out two gold pieces behind him.

"Thanks, Harry. Yuh're shore good to yore old pa. And about that business I spoke of—I guess we can talk that over later. Only one thing, Harry. If I was you, I wouldn't mention anything about me to anybody. Particular about me bein' yore pa." Hogan's voice became subtly anxious. "Right, Harry?"

Severn kept his back turned. He grinned to himself mirthlessly. "Right," he said. "I'm not likely to brag about it. Don't worry."

"Ain't yuh goin' to shake hands, Harry?"

"No," said Severn.

He heard Hogan's gusty sigh and then the opening of the door.

"Good night—son."

Severn shuddered again.

The door closed. Hogan's boots scuffed along the hall.

The stiffening went out of Severn's back. He moved slowly to a chair and sat down.

"It's a lie," he muttered. He spoke more loudly, with clenched fist and glaring eye. "A lie! Lie!"

The sound died emptily, without affirmation or denial.

He arose and blew out the lamp. Not bothering to undress, he flung himself upon the bed and crossed an arm over his eyes. . . .

Morning came. The sun slid up to the window. For a time Harry Severn squinted drearily, then he arose, washed and shaved. He ate breakfast in the hotel dining room and moved out to the street. The tension of yesterday's court trial was gone. Today the town panted sluggishly in the dust and warming sunlight. Severn's tread echoed solemnly on the wooden walk.

A Negro girl, basket under arm, came out of Turner's "GROCERIES & GENL MDSE" and curved a white smile.

"Mawnin', Mistah Sevahn."

"Mornin'," he replied absently. He stopped. "Tess! Is Mrs. Cummings home?"

"She's always to home. Miz Cummin's ain' the goin' kind." The girl smiled again and rolled her eyes in a way which suggested that she could, if she chose—although she never, never would—tell just what kind Mrs. Cummings was. "You want me to give her any message, Mistah Sevahn?"

"No-o. I might drop in to see her myself. Thanks, Tess." Severn nodded brusquely and went on.

A SADDLER was tied before the false-fronted, one-story County Building. The horse bore Devoe's Boxed D brand. Severn frowned at the horse a moment, then entered the building. He paused with his hand on the knob of the door to the sheriff's office.

Inside the office someone was saying: "—don't figure it'll be more'n a day or two we'll have to wait."

"We'll be ready," Sheriff Trimble's voice answered. "I'll ride out today and see Otto Krantz. I'll have him get a half-dozen hoemen together, and I'll deputize 'em in a bunch."

"Then no matter who we rope in, the hoemen can't blame us, and Devoe can't blame them. It ought to avoid trouble."

"It's a good idea," said Sheriff Trimble.

"I saw one range war. Devoe's not goin' to get an excuse to begin one around here—not if I can help it. I don't care if I do work for him. He ain't the biggest man on earth. Other folks got rights, even farmers."

"Try explainin' that to him," growled the sheriff.

"I did, once or twice. Oh, he ain't too bad. Fact is, I think he'd be pretty reasonable, if he hadn't had somebody pushin' him all these years. That kind of changes a man."

"I know what yuh mean," said Sheriff Trimble.

"Well, I'll get word to yuh when something turns up."

"I'll be ready," said the sheriff.

Severn stepped quickly back from the door and flattened himself against the wall. Devoe's foreman, Ted Gamboy, came out of the office. He left the building without seeing Severn. Severn went into the office.

Sheriff Mark Trimble was seated on a corner of his desk. Unnecessarily and a bit uneasily he said:

"Ted Gamboy was just here."

"Yeah, I know. I heard part of what he was sayin'."

Trimble looked embarrassed. "Ted thinks there's a little rustlin' goin' on. He's been missin' a few head."

"Yeah?" Severn set his face blankly. "Devoe didn't think so."

"Well, Ted does. Tom Bailey thinks he's lost a few, too."

"Yeah?"

"The idea is," said Trimble, "to get some of the Hoss Flats men in the posse along with Gamboy. That way, if it turns out to be a Hoss Flats man that's doing the rustlin', Devoe can't blame all the hoemen."

"I know," interrupted Severn. "I heard that part."

Speaking more slowly, Trimble said: "There's another angle to it. Gamboy don't want you in the posse. He didn't even want—"

"I know." Severn nodded grimly. "He didn't even want me to be told anything about it. Right?"

"Somethin' like that," the sheriff admitted reluctantly.

"He and Tom Bailey think I'm in on the rustlin'."

"He didn't say that."

"But he thinks it. What do you think, Mark?"

Trimble looked at him steadily. "That's a pretty poor question, Harry. I'm goin' to give yuh what yuh deserve—a good, straight answer! I didn't like it when Devoe wished you onto me, and I didn't like you. I'm not shore I do yet. But I know yuh ain't a crook—at least, not a two-bit rustlin' crook. That answer yore question?"

"Yeah," said Severn ruefully, "it seems to cover the ground right well. Am I in on yore posse then?"

"If yuh want to be—yes. I'll leave it up to you."

"And if anything goes wrong, I'll get blamed. You will, too."

"Prob'bly. I'm gettin' used to bein' blamed."

Severn grinned. "I ought to go along just to rile Gamboy and Tom Bailey. But I guess I won't." He unpinned his badge and put it on Trimble's desk. "I'm quittin', Mark."

The sheriff picked up the badge and juggled it in his palm. He gazed at Severn from beneath lowered brows.

"Why, Harry?"

"Why?" Severn shrugged. "Because I'm tired of badge-totin', I reckon. You don't like me. Mebbe I don't like you. Fair enough?"

X

TRIMBLE'S worried brown eyes continued to rest upon Severn. He stared so long and steadily that Severn began to feel uncomfortable. Then faintly the graying sheriff smiled.

"Fair enough," he agreed, "if yuh

want to put it that way, Harry. But yuh'll have to wait till the county checks come in for your pay."

"That's all right, Mark. I hear you'll be gettin' out, too."

"Yes," said the sheriff wryly. "I discovered that I'm growin' a little old for the job. What is needed here is a younger, a more aggressive man who can raise ructions. Bah!" Abruptly he turned, opened a desk drawer, and tossed in Severn's badge. "I suppose Devoe told yuh."

"Yep. He gave me the whole rigmarole."

"I suppose he has somebody else in mind for the job."

"So he said."

"I see," murmured Trimble.

He stood so, one hand on the desk, and his gaze away from Severn. There was a slight slump to his shoulders. Sheriffing, Severn guessed, was about the only thing he knew. He had been at it a good many years. If he wasn't a spectacular law officer, he certainly was a conscientious one.

"But," went on Severn, his voice a bit louder than he intended, "I doubt if Devoe gets the man he has in mind for this job. In fact, I'm pretty shore he won't."

"I see," murmured Trimble again. When he faced Severn, there was that faint smile on his lips. "I find," he said quietly, "I have made a sorry mistake."

"Yeah? What about?"

"About you, Harry. I find now that I'm losin' yuh, that I do like yuh. Strange, ain't it, Harry, how we're always findin' things out too late?"

"Well—" Severn didn't know what to say. He felt his cheeks flushing, and he scowled ferociously. "Well," he growled, "I got to go. Good luck, Mark."

He turned and fled from the office.

Farther down the street, on the opposite side from the County Building, was Sam Teller's Blue Bull Saloon. Severn went that way.

Sam Teller himself was behind the bar when Severn entered. A little later in the day a regular bartender would be on duty, and still later on, Sam Teller would endeavor to start a card game. At present, though, business was slack. Severn saw four customers in the place—two at the bar and two at a rear table.

One of the men at the table called to Severn. The man was Jean Targen. His companion was young Bob Devoe. Severn joined them.

Targen kicked around a chair. "Set down, Harry. Drink?"

"No, thanks."

Severn rested his knuckles on the table and remained standing. He looked at Bob. He was remembering now that Alice had said her brother and the gunman, Jean Targen, were becoming too friendly. It seemed a strange combination.

Cole Devoe's son had blond hair and pleasant features without any particular distinction save that, perhaps, of a too ready smile. He smiled now.

"Mother's coming home today," he said, as if by way of explaining his presence here. "I've got to meet the noon stage." He waved his hand toward Targen. "Jean's got some business of his own."

"That's right," said Targen. "Mebbe yuh can help me, Harry. When yuh was comin' into town last night did you meet anybody on the road? A tall hungry lookin' jasper with white whiskers."

"Yeah, I saw him," replied Severn.

"Didn't see him around town again this mornin', did yuh?"

"Nope. Lookin' for him?"

Targen nodded. "In a way. Nothin' important. I'll ask in the saloons. If he's still around I'll locate him easy enough."

Severn made no comment. He wondered what the gunman wanted with Jake Hogan. Was he on an errand for Devoe? What kind of an errand?

TARGEN seemed to have lost interest in Hogan's whereabouts. He was looking at Bob Devoe. Severn started to leave.

"Harry, wait a minute!" Targen called. "Don't happen to want to sell that place of yores by North Pass, do yuh?"

"To you? Don't tell me yuh're goin' to take up steady work!"

"Hardly." Targen grinned. "It's Bob wants it."

"That's right, Harry. I thought if I could get it cheap enough, I could sort of make a little start for myself."

Targen nodded solemnly. "He's got the right idea, Harry. It'll be kind of a weanin' pen for him—good experience. One of these days Bob's goin' to have a lot of responsibility on him."

Severn's thoughts ran swift and linked—Targen and Bob Devoe . . . his little place by North Pass. . . North Pass and rustled cattle

"Well?" said Bob.

"Don't rush the man," said Targen.

"I'll think it over," said Severn. "I'll let yuh know, Bob."

He nodded, turned abruptly and headed for the bar. He could feel Targen's round, deceptively innocent eyes boring into his back.

Sam Teller, neat as always, propped his elbows on the bar and looked at Severn.

"Drink?" he asked.

"No-o." Severn rubbed his chin. "Information," he said softly.

"Well?"

"Bob Devoe. Plays poker here a good deal, don't he?"

Sam laughed. "That's a good one!" he cried. "It reminds me of one I heard yesterday." He leaned forward, tapped Severn on the shoulder and said in a low voice, "Yes. Jean's got his eye on us. He's watchin' me like a hawk." He laughed again, loudly. "How's that one?"

"Loses a good deal, don't he?" murmured Severn.

"Of course!" exclaimed Sam. "It's green. It needs curin'."

"Where's he get the money? Not from the old man."

" 'Course not!" said Sam witheringly. "You bein' funny? How do I know? But if yuh want a *good* smoke, try one of these." He produced a box of cigars and opened it. "Ten cents," he said flatly.

Severn selected a cigar and tossed a dime on the bar.

Sam put away the box. "That all?"

"All. Thanks." Severn lighted the cigar.

Sam carried a bottle to the two customers at the far end of the bar. He returned to Severn and yawned.

"I hear," he said, "that our friend Martin has left the country. Early this mornin'. 'Judas Iscariot Martin' they're callin' him now."

"I know. Tom Bailey gave him that name."

"Tom Bailey," said Sam in a guarded tone, "had better pull in his horns. He's liable to be shakin' hands with poor Monahan before he knows it."

"He can shake hands with the devil for all I care!"

Sam raised his eyebrows. "So?"

"Yes, so! I'm not playin' nursemaid for every overgrown lunkhead that thinks he's a hellion on wheels."

"All right, all right," said Sam soothingly. "So yuh ain't playin' nursemaid. Did anybody ask yuh to? I never saw yuh get so hot under the collar over nothin'."

Sam paused, staring at something beyond Severn's shoulder.

"Jean!" said a loud voice. "Jean Targen!" Then he groaned. "Oh, glory, glory! Here we go!"

Severn turned. Tom Bailey had entered the saloon. The big man stood a little to one side of the door, his legs spraddled and his distended hand poised above his holstered gun. With the light from a front window at his back, he made a fine, heroic picture of an amateur gunman. His face was deathly pale.

For a moment after Tom Bailey's melodramatic entrance, the saloon was still. Then there was motion. The two men at the far end of the bar moved first. One of the men fell flat and tried to hide behind a spittoon. His companion nimbly vaulted the bar and landed resoundingly in a slop bucket. Bob Devoe dived under a table.

"Stop it, Harry!" Sam whispered. "You're the law. Stop 'em!"

SEVERN dropped his cigar. He eased out his gun.

Jean Targen alone seemed to maintain complete composure. He kept to his chair. His round eyes, fastened upon Tom Bailey, were placidly curious.

Bailey pointed a finger at the pudgy gunfighter.

"Killer!" he cried furiously. "Let's see yuh do to me what yuh did to Monahan!"

Targen smiled. "Gentlemen," he said in a pleased voice, "I call yuh to witness that I'm havin' this forced on me."

"Oh, no, yuh're not!" interrupted Severn. "I'll handle this."

Bailey glanced around. "You'll keep out of it!" he snarled.

Severn tilted his gun. "You wiggle a finger, and I shoot yore legs from under yuh."

The muzzle of a scattergun poked out beside Severn. From a position prudently behind Severn, Sam Teller said:

"And I'm backin' up the law. If *any* man moves, I blow his liver out!"

Severn circled behind Bailey. He slid out Bailey's gun and deposited it on the bar.

Sam Teller sighed noisily. "Why," he demanded of Bailey in an aggrieved tone, "do yuh have to come in here to commit suicide? Why can't yuh do yore dyin' and bleedin' outside? Ain't yuh got no consideration?"

The pallor of Tom Bailey's cheeks had changed to a dull red. He glared helplessly. He was in the position of a firecracker that has fizzled instead of exploding.

Targen chuckled. "Too bad, Tom. Yuh can try another time. Entertainment's over for now. The law has had its say."

Severn peeled off his coat and laid it on the bar. He put his hat and gun on top of it.

"Wrong, Jean," he said pleasantly. "I'm not the law. I quit this mornin'. And the entertainment's not over." He stepped up to Bailey. "Yuh're an ungrateful man, Tom. Here we just saved yore life, and yuh don't thank us. I don't like that. Would yuh want to take off yore hat?"

"What?" Bailey scowled at Severn and clenched his fists.

"I'll take it off for yuh," said Severn.

He snatched off the hat, slapped Bailey in the face with it, and tossed it on the floor.

"Hey!" yelped Sam. "Blast yuh, Harry! Go outside if yuh got to start a ruckus!"

Sam's voice was drowned by Bailey's wild outcry. In a sort of blind frenzy the rancher hurled himself at Severn.

Severn chopped upward between Bailey's flailing arms. The blow had a meaty sound as it straightened Bailey and stopped him. At once Severn hit him again. As Bailey's head tipped back, Severn pivoted and smashed him flush on the jaw.

Bailey was big and tough and he refused to go down. Twice more Severn hit him. Blood showed at the corner of Bailey's mouth. He was reeling and defenseless under the swift attack. He covered his face with his arms and backed away.

Severn stalked him. When Bailey was back to the bar, Severn began swinging open-handed, and the only sound in the place was the rasp of Bailey's breathing and the spat of Severn's palms.

Severn stepped back. "Yuh disappoint me," he said scornfully. "Yesterday, Tom, I thought yuh was a scrapper."

Bailey lowered his arms. For an instant his eyes were bright above his puffing cheeks. Then his gaze dulled and he groped for support. He started slipping to the floor, his head lolling forward.

Belatedly wary, Severn tried to leap aside. Bailey catapulted himself upward. His head crashed into Severn. Severn's feet flew up and the back of his skull hit the floor.

Severn's ears roared. The ceiling was whirling. Bailey sprang upon him. Clubbed fists ground down on Severn's temples.

Severn clamped an arm around Bailey's neck, strove to turn over and get his knees under him. Bailey battered him with elbows and knuckles. Severn tightened his arm around Bailey's neck, shutting off Bailey's wind. Bailey pressed a red-hot thumb against Severn's eye.

Severn's body curved backward. His heels made an agonized drumming on the floor, but he held his iron squeeze on Bailey's neck. Suddenly the pressure was gone from Severn's eye and Bailey was thrashing to get free.

Severn released him, glad enough to roll away without any further damage. He came to one knee and rested there, tenderly rubbing his eye.

BAILEY, on his feet, open-mouthed and gasping, circled slowly. His body tensed and his arms crooked. He rushed at Severn.

Severn threw himself sideward. One of Bailey's pumping knees grazed his jaw, collided terrifically with his shoulder, and Severn was flung over on his back.

Off-balance, Bailey made a half turn and slammed, back on, into the bar. There was a crash of toppling glassware and an agonized wail from Sam Teller. Bailey cried out and his eyes went heedless. Without pause he dived headlong for Severn's prostrate form.

This, Severn knew, was his moment. His legs balled and thrust up mightily to plant his feet in Bailey's mid-riff.

Bailey's heels described a high parabola overhead, and his arms were outflung. He passed over Severn, lazily turning through the air. The impact of his landing jarred the building.

Severn was upon him instantly. He grabbed Bailey's head in both hands and battered it on the floor.

A hand tugged at Severn's shoulder. He looked up into the face of Sam Teller.

"D'yuh want to kill him?" asked Sam.

Severn brushed Sam aside. In a quick flow of movement he was off Bailey and stooping over. He straightened, and Bailey's inert body came up with him. He swung the man shoulder-high, dropped him and seized his wrist.

As Bailey fell, his rigidly held arm struck Severn's bent knee and made a dull cracking noise. Bailey thudded to the floor and lay huddled and motionless.

XI

FOR brief moments there was stillness in the saloon. The fight had attracted an audience, for a half-dozen men formed a compact group by the opened door. They gazed at Severn with sullen, disapproving eyes. Then, behind Severn, Sam Teller said:

"The man was licked, and you had to do that, after he was out cold."

"He didn't feel it, did he? Can yuh think of a better time to do it?" Severn's voice was harshly defiant. He went to the bar, slipped his gun into its holster, and put on his hat and coat.

"All right, fellers," said Sam Teller briskly. "We got to get him to the doc's. Careful of that arm."

Severn watched in the back-bar mirror as four men lifted the unconscious Tom Bailey and carried him out.

Jean Targen was still seated at his table. His gaze, as it met Severn's in the mirror, was brooding and mournful.

"Harry," he murmured, "I'll not forgive yuh for that. Couldn't yuh have made it his other arm?"

"No," answered Severn.

He left the saloon and plodded wearily across the sunlit street. He had not gone far when a voice hailed him.

"Harry!' Peg Teller was standing on her front porch. She indicated the open door behind her. "Get in here!" she ordered grimly.

Severn hesitated, then shrugged and turned toward her. He preceded her through the house to the kitchen. She pulled out a chair.

"Sit down!" she said.

Severn sat down. He took off his hat.

Peg poured warm water from a teakettle into a basin. She was smaller than Alice Devoe, and dark where Alice was fair. There was a tranquil surety in all Peg's motions which Alice lacked.

Severn scowled slightly. Why, he wondered, was he making this comparison? Alice was Alice, and Peg was—well, Peg was folks. You could talk with Peg like a man, sometimes. And other times you were uneasily aware that Peg most certainly was not a man.

Severn willed his mind into a comfortable blankness. He waited for the inevitable questions, but Peg was silent. That was another thing about Peg—she knew when to ask questions and, what was much more important, she knew when not to. Puzzle: Why, when he blanked his mind, did Peg always take possession?

"I had a little trouble," he said lamely.

"So I see." Peg was dabbling a clean white rag in the basin of water. "Tilt your head back," she commanded.

Severn tilted his head back. "It was

[*Turn page*]

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Tom Bailey," he said.

"Yes," replied Peg. "I know. I saw them carry him out."

She gently mopped his face with the wet rag. Her wide dark eyes were so close that Harry Severn had the sensation of falling right into them. Peg frowned and swiped the rag across his nose with sudden roughness.

"Sit quiet!" she said angrily.

Severn closed his eyes and sat quiet. He still had that pleasurable falling sensation.

The front door opened and shut. Peg stepped back, and Severn looked around. Sam Teller came into the kitchen. He pointed at Severn and spoke to his daughter.

"Did he tell yuh what happened?"

"Not yet he hasn't."

"Fine," said Sam. "Then I'll tell yuh. Jean Targen was over at the place. Tom Bailey walked in all primed to shoot it out with Jean over that Monahan business. Harry here pulled a gun and stopped it. Then, when everything was calmed down, Harry walked up to Tom and slapped him in the face. He started the fight and finished it—got Tom down and banged his head on the floor till Tom was out cold. And then—" Sam paused.

Peg set down the basin. "Go on," she said impatiently.

"And then," said Sam, "when Tom was licked, when he was out cold, Harry grabbed Tom's arm and broke it across his knee. What's your opinion of a feller like that, Peg?"

Severn reached for his hat. "All right, Sam," he said thickly, "I'll get out."

"You," said Sam in a stern aside, "will stay put and keep shut! Well, what yuh think of him, Peg?"

Slowly Peg said: "Which arm was it, Sam?"

"That's it!" Sam nodded soberly. "You've guessed it, Peg. It was his right arm. I was dumb at first. I couldn't figger why Harry would do such a thing. Jean got it right off, though. He was pretty sad. He'd counted on hangin' up Tom's scalp. Well, I'm goin'."

THE gambler turned to leave. He glanced back at Severn.

"Who was it, Harry," he asked gently, "that said somethin' about not playin' nursemaid to big Tom Bailey? It wasn't you who said that, was it?"

He laughed jeeringly and went out.

Peg had emptied the basin and was refilling it. She set it on the painted chest beneath the wall mirror.

"Here," she said. "You can do the rest of your washing yourself."

Severn washed. He smoothed down his hair. He examined himself in the mirror. His face wasn't too bad. A few light cuts and some bruises. His eye was bloodshot, but he could see well enough.

He saw Peg watching him in the mirror. Instantly she scowled.

"I suppose now you want coffee," she said.

"Well. . . . That's all, though. I'm not hungry."

"I shouldn't think you would be. A pretty object you are!"

Peg opened the stove and viciously heaved in a couple of chunks of wood. She banged the coffee pot, keeping her back to Severn.

Severn sat down at the kitchen table, sprawled his legs, and half-closed his eyes. For the moment he was completely relaxed. His gaze followed Peg with drowsy interest, noting the tilt of her head, the curve of her cheek, the soft swing of her body beneath the crisply starched house-dress as she turned the handle of the coffee grinder.

Her movements became slower—ceased.

She spoke with her head bent over, her voice muffled.

"It's true, isn't it, Harry?"

"What?"

"You broke Tom's arm so he wouldn't try to gun-fight Jean."

"Well . . ."

"I think that's why, but I want you to tell me yourself."

Severn hesitated, then nodded. "That's why, Peg."

"You don't like Tom Bailey, do you?"

"No!"

"Then why'd you do it? You could have stopped the fight today and let it go at that, couldn't you? It's none of your business if Tom wants to tackle Jean again sometime, is it?"

"No-o." Severn gestured helplessly. "I don't know why I did it, Peg. I just got soft-headed, I guess. I . . . Well, I did it."

"Alice Devoe used to like Tom. Maybe she still does."

"So what?"

"You know what. It's like loaning a man money in a poker game. He'll turn around and break you every time."

"All right, then he'll break me. I told you I was soft-headed. No use rubbin' it in."

"I'm not rubbing it in. I'm just trying to make you see what a big fraud tough Harry Severn is."

"I'm not a fraud!"

"Oh, yes, you are, pardner. By the way, you know what people will say about you, don't you? They'll say it was a dirty, cowardly trick to break Tom's arm after he was helpless."

Severn scowled. "I wouldn't want you to think that, Peg."

"You know I don't."

"Then," said Severn with finality, "I don't care what anybody else thinks. Let 'em say what they please."

"Yes," said Peg. "Let 'em!"

There was a strange lilt in her voice; she gave the coffee grinder a whirl that made it dance.

The coffee hit the spot. Severn discovered that he was hungry after all. Peg peeled him three hard-boiled eggs. He topped off the eggs with bread and jelly.

"I didn't get that jelly quite stiff enough," said Peg hopefully. "And that bread's not as good as my bread generally is."

"It's not too bad," Severn responded consolingly.

Peg sighed. She poured him a second cup of coffee and took a cupful herself. She sat down across the table from him.

Severn rolled a cigarette. "I quit my lawing job," he said.

"No! When, Harry?"

"This morning."

"Why?" She glanced at him searchingly. "Another one of those things you don't know why you do??"

"Mebbe." Severn lighted his cigarette. "Let's forget it."

"What're you going to do now?"

"I reckon I'll go out on that place of mine."

"How nice! Right close to the Devoes. Have you told Alice the glad news yet?"

"Not yet. . . . Cut it out, Peg! You don't hear me passin' remarks on Bob Devoe, do yuh?"

"Of course not! Why should you?" Peg looked brightly astonished. "You certainly haven't anything against Bob, have you?"

"No!" said Severn savagely.

STEADILY they gazed at each other. Peg smiled a twisted smile.

"Pretty looking pair, aren't we, Harry? Like those eggs—been under water too long."

"Well . . ."

Peg raised her coffee cup. "A toast, Harry. To Alice and Bob and their papa's barrelful of money Most particularly to the money! Drink 'er down! Drink hearty, pardner!"

Severn eyed the girl warily. He gulped his coffee.

There was a thud and a splash as Peg's cup landed on the floor.

"I dropped it, pardner." Her laugh was brittle.

Severn frowned. "Look, Peg! Be serious. I want to tell yuh somethin'. You know I don't know who my father or mother was."

"Well?"

"Supposin' I told yuh I do know. Supposin' I told yuh my father was a mean, sneakin' crook and that my mother was —well, was just about as bad as a woman could be."

"Well?"

"I mean," said Severn with some exasperation, "what's a man to do in a case like that?"

"You might try hiding in a monastery."

Severn stood up and jammed on his hat. "I reckon yuh're right, Peg," he said in a weary tone. "You have been under water too long. Nothin' much matters to yuh."

"Unimportant things don't. Important things do."

"I know. Important thinks like money."

She smiled her twisted smile. "Sometimes," she said quietly, "I think I could kill you, Harry, with pleasure."

"And sometimes," Severn retorted grimly, "you make me so mad that I could reach out and—and—"

"And what, Harry?"

"Nothin'. I'm goin'. Thanks for the feed."

"You'd better go! Any man as blind and dumb as you are!" Suddenly the girl sprang to her feet. Her eyes were furious. Her lower lip trembled. "Get out of here!" she cried, her voice nearly a scream. "Right away, before I throw something! Get out!"

Severn left the kitchen in a hurry. He halted by the front door.

"Peg," he called back pacifically.

The house was quiet. Then from the kitchen came a slight hiccough. Almost it sounded like a suppressed sob.

Severn went out, scratching his head. He felt that in some way he had acted shabbily, yet he wasn't sure how. Peg, he guessed, was having one of her moody days.

XII

NOW the stage had come in. As Severn plodded along the plank walk, Cole Devoe's new buggy flashed smartly by. Devoe was driving, and beside him, stiff as one of Peg's starched dresses, her strong aquiline nose jutting proudly, sat Mrs. Devoe, newly arrived home from one of her frequent Eastern visits. She glanced briefly at Severn with her cold, haughty eyes, and favored him with the suspicion of a nod.

Behind the buggy came a buckboard, driven by one of the ranch hands and carrying trunks, bags and hatboxes. On horseback and following the buckboard was young Bob Devoe. The procession swept out of town and was gone in a dust haze.

Ahead of Severn, lounging on the walk, was Jean Targen.

Severn turned off the main street, cut through a vacant lot and emerged on Plummer Street. His stride lengthened. Each footfall was heavy and deliberate. His countenance was gloomy, his whole aspect that of a man resolutely prepared to take a cold plunge. He went up to a house—white-painted and two-story—and pulled the bell.

Tess, Mrs. Cummings' black maid, opened the door. She showed her magnificent white teeth.

"Come in, Mistah Sevahn. Mis Cummin's is expectin' yu'."

Severn removed his hat and entered the house. He glanced back and saw Jean Targen sauntering around the corner a block away.

Tess closed the door. She ushered Severn into a living room.

Mrs. Eugene Cummings, her white hair piled high, was seated on a horsehair sofa with a book in her lap. She was wearing a purple wrap with flowing sleeves and a feather neck-piece. Severn had only a slight acquaintance with her and he was embarrassed. In his experience most women were fully clothed by this time of day.

She waved her hand cheerfully. "Sit down, Harry. Tess told me you wanted to see me. After donations for something?"

"Not exactly."

Severn sat on the edge of a chair. He stared grimly at this white-haired woman who had such amazingly young features and body and who was—so it was rumored—a very good friend indeed of Cole Devoe.

At once, sharply, she said: "That's all, Tess. Shut the door."

Tess left. She slammed the room door.

"It's about me that I want to see yuh," said Severn.

"You?" She frowned. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"You will. It's about you, too. About both of us."

"Oh-h." She laid aside the book.

Severn looked down at the floor. "You know," he said in a low voice, "or mebbe yuh don't, that I was raised by a foster father. At least, I thought he was only my foster father. His name was Jake Hogan."

There was a faint gasp from the woman.

"My mother," went on Severn, "abandoned me to Jake Hogan when I was a baby. She was runnin' from the law at the time." He drew a long breath. "Her name," he said, "was Fern Kemp."

There was complete silence in the room. Severn slowly lifted his gaze. The woman was waxen pale. Rigid creases showed by her mouth.

"How did you know?" she whispered.

"That you are Fern Kemp? I never was absolutely shore till now. I traced yuh—it took a good many years. Finally, three years ago, the trail brought me here."

Color returned to the woman's cheeks. "You've been here three years," she murmured. "Has it taken you all this time to guess I am Fern Kemp?"

"No," replied Severn. "I guessed it a long time ago. But—"

"I understand. It was better only to suspect the worse than to know it." She smiled sadly. "That was it, wasn't it, Harry?"

Severn didn't answer. He gazed down

at his hands. He heard her arise from the sofa, heard her quick pacing movements. She came close and halted. He could smell her perfume, could see the tips of her ridiculous, wine-red embroidered slippers with scarlet pompons.

"This woman," he thought, "is my mother."

Her voice ran out softly to him. "It's a shock to be suddenly confronted with a grown son. I don't . . . Shall we have a drink?"

"No. I don't think I . . Well, I don't want one. Thanks."

"Ah, I've made a mistake already! I forget that though women sometimes drink, a man's mother never does. Forgive me, Harry."

THE wine-red slippers retreated. He heard her sit down on the sofa. Her tone was calm now, conversational.

"What made you decide to come here today, Harry? Something must have."

"Yes. It was Jake Hogan. He's here."

"Oh-h. He's here? You saw him? Talked to him?"

"Yes," said Severn. "Last night. He told me somethin' that it's mighty hard to believe." He gripped his knees and bent forward, staring at the woman. "One question—" he cried hoarsely. "Who was my father?"

"I expected that." She shook her head and tightened her lips. "That's something you'll never know, Harry. It's a secret"—dramatically she touched her chest—"locked up in here."

"You forget," said Severn, "that I talked to Jake Hogan last night. He says *he* is my father."

"What? Oh, my heavens!" She clapped her hand over her mouth.

"Did he lie? Or didn't he? I've got to know, and I'm goin' to know." Severn stood up. "The truth!" he said sternly. "I have a right to know. Is Jake Hogan my father?"

"Now wait!" She leaned back against the sofa and made a weak motion of protest. "I must think, Harry."

"No," said Severn in an implacable tone. "You know. You don't need to think. Is Jake Hogan my father?"

"Yes," she whispered "He's . . . Let me tell you how I—"

"Not now," said Severn drearily. "Yuh can tell me later."

"Yes, later." Fern Kemp spoke without moving her lips. Her green eyes were dilated. She sat as still as a plaster image.

Severn inclined his head gravely to her. He turned and left.

For an instant he paused on the porch, the closed door behind him, his eyes squinting against the sun-glare.

"Mother," he said tentatively under his breath. "Father."

He laughed harshly, went down the steps onto the sidewalk.

"A red bull," he was thinking, "for red calves. And a blackguard for blackguards. My old man."

He laughed again, but there was no mirth in the sound. His dark tough features were lowering; his thick shoulders swung with his heavy stride. At this moment Harry Severn was a dangerous-looking man. He looked like a man who might be capable of anything. . . .

The next day Harry Severn gave up his room at the Brinker City Hotel. Shortly after noon he crossed the shallows of Tinicum Creek on North Pass road and turned his horse left on a narrow trail that wound along the brush slopes of the foothills. The trail came out at the head of a lean basin of grassland.

Close by, shadowed by a huge and solitary bullpine, was a small corral with a barreled spring at one corner. A bony, saddle-galled horse blinked listlessly at Severn from behind the corral poles. Adjoining the corral was a jerry-built barn. Beyond was an unpainted, weathered shack.

Severn unsaddled his own horse and turned it into the corral, tossed in hay from the small store in the barn. He shouldered his warbag and blanket-roll and headed for the shack.

The shack door was open, and green-bodied flies buzzed importantly in and out. Overhead, as Severn crossed the threshold, he heard the hard thump of a wood rat. From the far end of the shack came a horrid, strangling, gurgling sound. The gurgling sound was repeated. It issued from the gaping mouth of Jake Hogan.

Jake was sprawled on his back on a mess of dirty blankets in one of the shack's two built-in bunks. His eyes were closed and a long arm, dangling over the bunk side, rested protectingly upon an empty whisky bottle. His chest

heaved, as he gasped and gurgled and growled.

Severn gave the snoring man a contemptuous stare and dropped his own belongings on the second bunk. He found a twig broom left by the former occupant of the shack and began a vigorous cleaning out of rat litter, dust and refuse. He gave the bottle by Jake's dangling hand an angry fling through the doorway.

His exploring broom dragged out another whisky bottle from under Jake's bunk. This bottle was full. Severn started to fling it after its companion, then changed his mind. He replaced the bottle under the bunk.

SEVERN finished his cleaning chores, sat down on a box, cocked his feet on a window sill and gave himself up to scowling reflection. Jake Hogan continued his snoring. Finally, in exasperation, Severn kicked the side of the bunk.

"Shut up!" he roared.

Jake reared up. "Who? Wha's matter? What!" He peered blearily. "Oh, it's you! Mornin', son."

"It's afternoon," said Severn coldly. "Go wash yore face."

Jake fumbled under the bunk and brought out the bottle. He took a long swig.

"Likker's my failin', son."

"For my money yuh're better company drunk than sober. Go wash."

Jake stuck the bottle in his coat pocket and came to his feet. As he started for the door, surprisingly he didn't stagger. He got as far as the door and halted, frowning and rubbing his whiskery cheeks. He looked back with an expression of cunning.

"Say," he demanded, "what's goin' on at this place?"

"What d'yuh mean, what's going on?"

"Who's runnin' night cattle through here?"

"Yuh're drunk!"

"Shore I'm drunk. But I know what I seen. Last night a couple fellers came hustlin' through here with about twenty head of cattle. Went by not a hundred yards from the shack, right over there."

"Did they see you?"

"'Course not! I ain't that dumb—not old Jake Hogan!" He twisted his face in a prodigious wink. "You got a smart old man, Harry. Stick to old Jake Hogan, Harry, and one of these days we're goin' to be rollin' in clover. We'll have Cole Devoe crawlin' to us on his hands and knees."

"Go wash yoreself," Severn repeated. "Yore hands, too!"

Jake gave a martyred sigh. He left the shack.

Severn smoked a cigarette, then he, too, went out. A short distance from the shack he came upon bunched cattle tracks. The tracks seemed to be heading directly for the notch of North Pass.

Severn sauntered to the corral and saddled his horse. Jake was reclining in the shade of the big bullpine. He lifted his frowsy head.

"Yuh goin' somewheres, Harry?"

"No," said Severn. He climbed into the saddle.

"Listen, son. Bring me back another bottle. I ain't hardly—"

Severn rode off.

XIII

UNTIL Severn was out of sight of the shack, he followed the old wagon trail toward North Pass road. Then he left the trail and began to buck the brush uphill. Fifteen minutes later he found the bunched cattle tracks again.

The sign was not difficult to read—cattle tracks occasionally overlaid by hoof prints of a horse. Twenty to thirty head of cattle, so Severn judged, had been choused along by two riders.

After a zigzag climbing course through brush and timber, the tracks ended in the shallow, gravel-bottomed headwaters of Tinicum Creek. Severn rode into the water and turned his horse upstream.

This higher land was becoming rugged. Rock walls reared up on either side of the creek. For a time Severn splashed along in cool, damp shadow. Then the rock walls fell away, and on the lowering embankment cattle tracks abruptly reappeared.

The tracks continued to climb toward North Pass. An alert wariness now marked Severn's progress. He dismounted and led his horse. The going was steadily rougher and steeper. Slide gouges showed in the cattle tracks. Ahead of him Severn could see the clear sky between the dark tree trunks.

Severn left the trail. He tied his horse and made a crouching advance. Suddenly he came out on the rim of a sort

of pothole, a circular depression perhaps a quarter of a mile across and a couple hundred feet in depth. To his left he saw the descending prints of the cattle he was trailing. On the far side of the pothole he saw the cattle—he counted twenty-three—held by a crude brush corral.

Severn found a comfortable hiding place in the undergrowth and settled himself to wait. The sun dropped toward the west and long pools of shade lay across this high land. Severn sighed gently and stretched. Then he suddenly tensed, drew out his gun.

Someone was approaching. There was the thud of hoofs and the creak of saddle leather.

The rider made his appearance only a few feet from Severn. He sat his saddle peering down at the cattle with a mingled expression of petulance and anxiety. The man was young Bob Devoe.

All at once Bob's glance brightened. He snatched off his hat and waved it. Severn saw an answering motion from the opposite rim of the pothole. Two riders showed there.

After waving to Bob, the two riders urged their horses down a narrow trail that led to the bush corral. Bob turned to go.

"Wait, Bob," Severn said softly.

Bob gasped, whirled to look into Severn's gun.

"Come here!" ordered Severn. "Get down here out of sight."

Bob dragged himself forward. He sank down in the undergrowth beside Severn. He had grown paper pale, and was panting.

"Scared, eh?" Severn nodded grimly. "Yuh ought to be! Who're those fellows yuh just waved to?"

"I—I don't know. I just saw 'em and waved."

"Yuh'd better know," said Severn. "Whose cattle are those and who brought 'em up here last night? And before yuh answer, I'll tell yuh somethin'. I was in my shack last night when they went by."

Bob seemed on the point of collapse. His mouth opened and shut. He licked his lips.

"Yuh—yuh saw us, Harry?"

"That's right," lied Severn. "Both you and Jean Targen. I know now why yuh wanted to buy my place. It was so yuh could rustle yore old man's cows through there. They are yore old man's cows, ain't they?"

Bob nodded weakly. "Mostly, Harry. Let me explain."

"Never mind," said Severn contemptuously. "I know the answers. Yore old man don't give yuh enough poker money so yuh get it by stealin' his cows. Nice business!"

Bob dropped his gaze. "I reckon I'm not much account, am I, Harry?" he said drearily.

"Not much. Still, as long as yuh admit it, yuh can't be too bad. How'd yuh work it? You bring the stock up here and those two fellows yuh waved to take over. That the setup?"

Bob nodded again. "They drive 'em up through the Pass. I don't think they do any brand changin'. They butcher 'em and sell 'em to a railroad camp on the other side of the Pass. They got a contract."

"Who are they?"

"Jack and Jill." Bob shook his head. "You don't know 'em, and I ain't goin' to tell yuh. I'm not that bad, Harry. I may be a crook but I'm not a squealer."

SEVERN put away his gun. His gaze softened somewhat.

"Who got yuh into this?" he asked. "Jean Targen?"

"No!" said Bob sullenly. "I got both of us into it. I needed help, so I asked Jean. I'm not puttin' the blame on anybody!"

"Why'd yuh come back here now?"

"To see if the cattle were still here. I wasn't shore if—" Bob jumped. "What's that?"

A gun banged. Someone shouted. More guns went off.

Severn smiled thinly. "I think," he said, "that Jack and Jill are fallin' downhill." He raised to his knees and peered cautiously through the brush.

The bottom of the pothole was a scene of violent turmoil. The two riders who had waved to Bob Devoe had arrived at the brush corral where the cattle were. Now, apparently, they were eager to leave again. Both had their guns out and were riding furiously toward the trail they had taken dowr there. From a point almost directly below Severn, and invisible to him, came a series of shots.

"Halt!" a stentorian voice bellowed. "Shtop!"

One of the riders answered with a mocking whoop. He fired back over his horse's rump.

"A trap!" cried Bob. He sprang wildly to his feet. "I've got to help 'em!"

"Shut up!" said Severn harshly. He jerked Bob down. "Watch!" he said. He gripped Bob by the nape of the neck.

The two fleeing riders had reached the foot of the trail. One of the men left his horse. He executed a loose dive and landed headfirst on a rock pile. He lay quiet.

"One," said Severn. He dug his fingers deeper into Bob's neck. "Watch," he repeated. "Rustlers. See what happens."

The second rider kept on going. He spurred his horse cruelly. The horse humped itself up the trail. Gunfire had ceased. As he reached the far rim of the pothole, the rustler turned and lifted his hand in a gesture of defiance.

There was a volley of shots, and the rustler toppled from the saddle. He slid back down the trail, rolling and disjointed like a man of rags.

"Dead," muttered Severn. "Both of 'em. The price of twenty-three cows." He released his hold on Bob. "You saw it," he said. "Now what d'yuh think of rustlin'? Fun, eh?"

Bob shuddered, but didn't answer.

Several men carrying rifles appeared from some point below Severn who recognized Ted Gamboy, the tall figure of the sheriff and the black-bearded Otto Krantz. The others, he guessed, were hoemen from Horse Flats. They crossed the bottom of the pothole, they examined the two rustlers, then stood about, talking and reloading their rifles.

Otto Krantz was looking up at the rim of the pothole where Severn and Bob were hidden. He said something to Sheriff Trimble and pointed. Trimble nodded and called to the rest of the men. Immediately the whole posse began running back across the pothole.

Severn knew exactly what had happened. Otto Krantz had seen the two rustlers wave to Bob Devoe just before they had descended the trail into the pothole. Krantz suspected that someone was up here.

Severn grabbed Bob's arm. "How many ways out of this place?" he demanded fiercely.

"Two. Yuh can go around and cut across the creek upstream to—"

"No good!" Severn shook his head decisively. "I didn't see their tracks, so that's the way the posse must have come. If we go that way, we'll run right into 'em. And the only other way is down that little canyon where yuh drove up the cattle. Right?"

"That's all. There's cliffs all around here back of the trees. I guess we could climb out on foot."

"And let 'em find our hosses? Uh-uh! We'll have to chance the canyon. Come on now! Hurry! They'll be after us."

The two backed out of the undergrowth. Bob's horse was near. Severn ran to his own horse and swung into saddle. Bob, mounted, drew up beside him. They jolted and slid down the trail and into the shallow creek. They splashed through the canyon.

AS THEY left the canyon, there was a distant yell. The echo of a rifle shot bounced along the damp rock walls behind them.

Severn swerved his horse out of the creek, and Bob followed him. They bucked the brush and scrub timber downhill toward the valley rangeland. Severn kept a fairly straight course, angling away from Tinicum Creek and North Pass road.

"Where we goin'?" yelled Bob.

Severn shook his head and glanced at the sky.

The sun was gone and distant objects were becoming hazy. Severn slowed his horse and studied the back trail. He saw no sign of pursuit.

"Mebbe they've given up," said Bob hopefully. "Mebbe we ought to swing back to the road."

"No," said Severn. "That's just what they'll be watchin' for. And they haven't given up. Not Trimble and Krantz."

"They can track us here. I hear Trimble's good at that."

"He is. We'll give him somethin' to work on."

They went on, riding sidehill now instead of downhill. They made the turn around a long hogback and before them was a steep talus slope. Beyond and below was the mouth of Squaw Gorge, an area of shale rock and sandstone, narrow washes and strewn boulders.

Severn led the way down the talus slope, the two horses slipping and scrambling. They arrived at the bot-

tom in a dusty slide of loose rubble. Severn pushed on up a winding gully, then crossed the hard ground to another where he called a halt.

XIV

HERE in this barren bottomland, the night came swiftly, filling the hollows like a rising tide. Severn and Bob sat quiet and listening, but they heard nothing but the breathing of their horses.

Severn dismounted. "We'll wait a while," he said.

Bob swung to the ground. He gave a light, nervous laugh. "I guess they can't track us here. Not even Trimble."

"No," said Severn. "Not tonight anyway."

"D'yuh think they saw us—I mean enough to recognize us?"

"I don't think so. I hope not."

Bob repeated his light laugh. "And I guess," he said shakily, "that you're not goin' to turn me in about that rustlin'—not after you've taken all this trouble. Yuh're not, are yuh, Harry?"

"No," said Severn.

"And yuh think those other two, the two they shot, are dead?"

"Yes," said Severn. "They're dead. They won't do any talkin'. And yuh can be shore Jean Targen won't."

Bob sat down. "This is goin' to be a lesson to me, Harry," he said weakly. "I'll never do another crooked thing as long as I live."

Severn leaned against a boulder.

"I did you a favor last night, Harry," Bob spoke softly, placatingly. "Alice was mad at yuh for breakin' Tom Bailey's arm."

"Well?"

"I told her why yuh did it. Jean thinks yuh did it to keep Tom from tryin' to gunfight him. That's why, wasn't it, Harry?"

"Mebbe." Severn shrugged. He was amazed to find that Alice's opinion on the matter was of no great importance to him.

Bob was moodily silent. After a while he stood up. He peered into the gloom.

"Will we have to stay here all night?" he asked.

"No," replied Severn. "Just until it's a little darker."

Twenty minutes later they climbed into their saddles.

"If anybody tries to stop us," instructed Severn, "don't run. Stop and let me do the talkin'. We've been together all afternoon. We've been lookin' for rustlers. That's our story."

They moved at a walk down the black course of Squaw Gorge. The ring of hoofs on the rocks was uncomfortably loud. The sound got on Severn's nerves. He wished he was well out of this mess. He had, he knew dismally, acted again like a soft-headed idiot. It was no affair of his if Bob Devoe wanted to get strung up for rustling.

"Harry?"

"Well!" said Severn irritably.

"I've just been thinkin'! If we'd been caught, Trimble and the rest might have thought you were a rustler, too."

"It's a possibility," Severn conceded drily.

"Why're yuh doin' it, Harry—helpin' me like this? On account of Alice? Because I'm her brother?"

"I suppose so."

Suddenly Severn was angry with himself. He knew quite well why he had done this crazy thing tonight. It wasn't because of Alice at all—it was because of Peg Teller. If Peg was silly enough to want this young weakling, then he, Harry Severn, would see that he was delivered undamaged, right side up and with care. It was, he thought sourly, a nice token of friendship. To Peg from Harry. Happy days, pardner.

The two men emerged from the gorge. Before them was the somber, starlit rangeland, ink-patterned where the knolls and brush patches were. The ring of hoofs changed to a quiet thudding. Severn swung his head warily. He didn't like the tight stillness, the long impenetrable shadows.

"Shtop!" the bull voice of Otto Krantz roared out of the dark.

Severn halted. "Stand still!" he ordered Bob.

He was too late. Horse and man had bolted.

Instantly, from a splotch of blackness on Severn's right, came a burst of rifle fire. Severn felt a slicing pain along his ribs. His horse reared, and Severn clutched at the saddle-horn. The horse bounded forward, racing after the fleeing Bob Devoe.

Severn let his horse run and clung to the horn with both hands. The rifle fire continued briskly for a minute, then

stopped. There was no sound in Severn's ears save the rush of the night wind and the gathering drum of hoofs beneath him. Dimly he could see Bob Devoe tearing along ahead of him.

BOB was pulling in his horse. He dropped back closer to Severn.

"Sorry, Harry," he called contritely. "I—I forgot. I jabbed with my spurs before I remembered what yuh'd told me."

"Keep goin'!" Severn cried savagely. "We've *got* to keep goin' now!"

He glanced behind him. Briefly, as it swept over the crest of a rise, he saw the bobbing, silhouette figures of a body of horsemen.

"They'll never catch us. Follow me, Harry!" There was a quick surge of excitement in Bob's voice. He was a good rider on an excellent horse. He knew every slope and gully in this hillside land.

Severn followed. He clenched his teeth and concentrated all his faculties upon staying in the saddle. The shock of that sudden pain along his ribs had left him as weak as a child.

There was a splash and a leap as his horse crossed a creek; Tinicum Creek again, Severn supposed. For a short time the two fleeing men held to North Pass road. Then Bob left the road and at a slower pace he led the way among brush clumps and around hillocks until Severn had lost all sense of direction. The horses picked up speed on a long downgrade that grew steeper and steeper. Severn jolted from side to side, half in the saddle, half out of it.

Bob waved his hand. "We've lost 'em!" he cried triumphantly. "Watch it here, Harry. Hang on!"

Severn saw Bob's horse make a high, stretching jump. He tried to lift with his knees as his own horse gathered itself and jumped. Beneath him he glimpsed the black line of a narrow gully. His horse landed jarringly on the far side of the gully, and Severn was shaken from the saddle. He sailed through the air and struck on his head.

There was a gray fog of semiconsciousness in which incoherent thought wisps swirled like phantoms. There was an interminably prolonged kneading of his stomach that made him sick. Then the kneading stopped and someone was saying: "Walk, Harry. Walk! Can't yuh walk?"

"Shore I can walk."

Was that his own voice answering? It must have been, for he was wading through the gray fog. He was walking. . . .

Harry Severn held his head and groaned. He opened his eyes cautiously and blinked at the lamplight. He looked about. He was in a bedroom and seated on the edge of a bed. His hat and coat and shirt were lying on a nearby chair.

The door then opened, and Bob Devoe came into the room carrying a basin of water and a folded sheet.

"What happened?" muttered Severn. "Where are we?"

"Don't yuh know? I brought yuh home. This is my room." Young Bob grinned. "I thought yuh was talkin' queer. Yuh've been sort of out of yore head ever since it happened. Yuh remember fallin' off yore hoss, don't yuh?"

"Yeah, I remember that."

Severn put his hand to the top of his head. A sore swelling had sprung up there. Bob knelt beside him. He started washing dried blood from a two-inch furrow across Severn's ribs.

"I wondered why yuh fell off so easy," Bob said soberly. "I didn't know about this till I got yuh here and saw the blood on yore shirt. Close! Just a little more, and yuh'd of got it."

"The posse!" exclaimed Severn with sudden alertness.

"We lost 'em. After yuh fell off, I just loaded yuh across yore saddle like a sack of meal and brought yuh in. Yuh got sick once."

Severn nodded. "I remember that, too. What'd yuh do about our hosses? If Gamboy finds 'em, he'll know they've been runnin'."

"He won't find 'em. I turned 'em loose. Yore saddle is hid back of the grain bin in the barn."

Bob put down the basin. He opened the folded sheet and tore it into strips. Then he began bandaging the bullet wound across Severn's ribs.

Severn shut his eyes. He was feeling queasy again.

"How did yuh get me in here?" he asked. "Didn't anybody see us?"

"Shore they did. Mother and Dad know yuh're here. Yuh walked in all

right. Yuh even spoke to them. I just told 'em that we were out together and yuh'd had a fall and were shook up a little. I said yuh were goin' to stay here the rest of the night." Bob finished the bandaging. He stood up with the basin in his hand. "You lie down now, Harry. I'll go empty this."

He left the room.

SEVERN flopped forward on the bed. Almost at once he heard a light footstep. He raised his head. Mrs. Devoe had come in. She gave Severn a regal nod.

"I saw the door open," she said, "and I wondered how you were feeling after your fall." She paused, staring. "What's that?" she demanded huskily. "There! On your back!"

Severn was suddenly conscious of his bared torso. "Whip scars," he replied in an embarrassed voice. "I got 'em long ago."

"No! I don't mean that. There! By your shoulder blade!"

The woman pointed with trembling finger. Her eyes had taken on a glazed appearance. The whites showed clear around the iris.

Severn twisted his head to examine his back. When he turned to Mrs. Devoe again, her high-nosed features were frostily composed.

"It was a shadow," she explained calmly. "I thought it was a bug. I hate bugs!"

Severn nodded. There had been no bug, and with the lamplight full upon him, there could have been no shadow. He wondered uneasily if the aristocratic Mrs. Devoe had been doing some drinking.

Her harsh lips bent in an anaemic smile. "I trust," she said, "that you'll soon recover from your fall. You may stay here for the night. I'll have Mrs. Fenner prepare the room next to this for you."

"Yes'm," mumbled Severn. "Thank yuh."

Mrs. Devoe swept from the room. At the doorway she looked back, and there was such concentrated ferocity in her glance that Harry Severn felt a chill of horror. Then she was smiling again.

"I trust," she said, "that you will sleep well. Good night, Harry."

She shut the door quietly and firmly.

XV

COLE DEVOE did not believe the somewhat glib story his son had told of an afternoon's ride with Harry Severn and Severn's fall from his horse. Devoe knew that Ted Gamboy and Sheriff Trimble were out on a rustler hunting expedition and he suspected now that Severn and Bob somehow had been mixed up in the affair.

While his suspicions simmered, he was awaiting the return of Ted Gamboy and a detailed report on the evening's happenings. He was waiting in his lamplit office, slumped at his desk, a whisky bottle beside him.

The day of Jean's court trial had been a bad day for Cole Devoe. Yesterday, with the homecoming of his wife, had been a worse day. Now today there was this business of Severn and Bob. Devoe had known his son was weak, but if it turned out that he was crooked as well, the limit would have been reached.

Events were piling upon events, and always in the background as uncanny as a black dog at a funeral, there was the dour figure of Harry Severn. Why? Who *was* Harry Severn? *Curse* Harry Severn!

The cattleman passed his hand across his eyes. He wondered if his imagination was working overtime. He had a feeling that he was marked by some malign Fate, that he was being rushed, willy-nilly, toward the abyss of disaster. He reached for the whisky bottle, then stayed his hand.

The office door had opened and closed.

Devoe glanced up at his wife and looked down again. "Madam," he said dismally, "prepare yoreself for a shock. I think our son is a rustler." There was no reply, and Devoe lifted his head. "Did yuh hear me?" he asked.

"I heard you." Minerva Devoe nodded indifferently. She placed her hands on the desk and gazed steadily at the cattleman. "And now you prepare yourself for a shock. I was just in Bob's room. Harry Severn had his shirt off. Did you ever see his back?"

Severn again! Devoe's nerves tightened.

"No," he said. "Is anything the matter with it?"

"Several things. For one thing he's got on a bandage. I think he must have a bullet wound. Another thing is a

small patch of moles under his left shoulder blade. Five of them. They make —"

"No!" cried Devoe. He leaped from his chair. He glared at his wife. "No!" he shouted wildly. "Yuh're imaginin' things!"

"Keep your voice down!" ordered the woman. Her features were coldly expressionless. "They make," she continued relentlessly, "a little V, with the largest mole at the bottom."

Devoe leaned on the desk. Momentarily he experienced the sensation of whirling speed. His lips moved stiffly.

"Then it's him."

"Yes," said Minerva Devoe. "I'm positive. It's him."

Devoe carefully sat down. "He's here," he said dully. "Right here in this house." He smiled at his granite-faced wife. "A joke, eh, my dear? The tangled webs we weave—"

He laughed lightly, casually. The laugh got out of control, climbed in pitch.

"Stop it!" said Minerva Devoe harshly. She thrust the bottle into his hand. "Drink!" she commanded.

Devoe drank so rapidly that he almost strangled. He put down the bottle and pressed his hand to his eyes and waited. The whisky began to burn. Devoe could feel the spreading of its bright, heartening fire. He made a gesture of profundity.

"We must think," he murmured. "We must hold council."

"We must *act!*" said Minerva Devoe. He looked up, and her glittering gaze impaled and held him. "Does he know?" she demanded. "Is there any possibility that he does?"

Weakly, he shook his head. "I don't think so." He straightened. "No," he said with assurance. "I'm shore he doesn't."

"Then why did he drift in here? Was it just chance?"

"Yes. I—I think so. It must have been."

"You'd better hope so," she commented grimly. "Him and Jake Hogan both here—it's a long chance that'd bring that about. Does Jake Hogan know he's here? Does he know who *he* is?"

Devoe groaned. "That's what I don't know."

"Tell me again what Jake said when he was here—every word!"

"Well, first he told Mrs. Fenner that his name was—"

Devoe swung around. There had been a knock at the door.

MRS. FENNER'S disapproving voice came through the panel.

"It's that Hoppelscoot man again, Mr. Devoe. Do you want to see him?"

"Yes," Minerva Devoe replied at at once. "Send him in here, Mrs. Fenner." She gave Devoe a frigid smile. "And now," she said in a lowered tone, "we'll find out what Jake Hogan knows."

Jake Hogan entered, or rather, slid into the office. He shut the door behind him, then kept his hand on the latch as if uncertain whether to retreat or advance. His gaze was upon Minerva Devoe.

"Well!" he exclaimed in elaborate astonishment. "If it ain't Jason Porter's nurse gal! Old Tod Suttler's young one. I never will forget the day they strung up old Tod. Yuh remember me, Minerva?"

"Yes," answered the woman calmly.

"Then everything's cozy. You know me and Cole knows me." Jake settled himself comfortably in a chair and winked at Devoe. "Quite a lady these days, ain't she, Cole?"

Devoe made no response. He gazed dumbly at his wife.

"What're you after?" she asked Jake. "More blackmail?"

"Of course not!" exclaimed Jake in an injured tone. "I come here to do you folks a favor, to warn yuh about somethin'."

"About what?" snapped Devoe.

"About . . . Well, about Harry Severn."

Devoe leaned limply back in his chair.

"Go on," said the woman grimly. "Warn us."

"Let me ask yuh somethin'. Do you know who Harry Severn is?"

"Yes."

"What? No, yuh don't! He ain't no common drifter."

"And I tell you," interrupted the woman crisply, "that we do know! What we want to find out is if he knows. Does he, Jake?"

"Not yet he don't. But—" Jake stopped speaking.

From somewhere about her person Minerva Devoe suddenly had produced

a derringer. She held the little gun steady.

"Jake," she said quietly, "have you told him yet? Have you even given him a hint who he is?"

Jake's lantern jaw sagged, then he threw up his hands in abject fright.

"No!" he cried earnestly. "I ain't told him a thing! He ain't got no idea—I swear he ain't!"

The woman stared at him a moment. She shoved the gun back into its hiding place and nodded to Devoe.

"I think he's probably telling the truth," she said contemptuously.

"It is the truth—I swear it is!" whined Jake. He drew in a deep breath and seemed to regain some of his assurance. "Now," he said, "I'll tell yuh somethin' good. He thinks I'm his pa."

"What!" Devoe gave a violent start.

"It's gospel truth, Cole. He's even got me stayin' with him on that little place of his."

MINERVA DEVOE showed her cold smile. "What's the price, Jake?"

Jake grinned and stroked his bristly cheeks. "Well," he said reflectively, "I figger it ought to be worth a little somethin' to you folks for him to keep on thinkin' I'm his pa. Just a little somethin', eh, Minerva?" He winked and then, as if struck by a new thought, squinted craftily. "Or," he drawled, "I might fix it so yuh'd be rid of him altogether. How'd that be, Minerva?"

The woman leaned forward eagerly. "You mean kill him?"

Devoe gasped. He looked at his wife in horrid fascination.

Jake Hogan, too, seemed startled. He shook his head emphatically. "No, *sir!* I don't mean nothin' like that. I ain't goin' to get mixed up in *that* kind of business!"

"Then what do you mean?"

"I mean," explained Jake carefully, "that I'll get him out of this part of the country for yuh. I'll play sick or somethin' and I can get a doctor to order me a change of climate. 'Course, Harry bein' my son, he'll have to go along to nurse his old pa."

The woman glanced at Devoe and shrugged slightly. She went to the office safe.

"It'll take a sight of money, Minerva," Jake said hopefully. "A sick man's gotta live awful soft."

"Here's three hundred for now." She flung him a packet of money.

Jake fingered the money and scowled. "That's nothin'!" he complained bitterly. "Even fifty thousand wouldn't hardly be enough."

"I said that was for *now!* Do you think we keep a gold mine in the house? And if Harry Severn finds out—" The woman made a gesture toward the hidden derringer.

Jake sprang to his feet. "He won't! I swear he won't!"

She opened the door. "I'll see you out," she said.

Devoe remained seated. He stared blankly at the wall. He heard his wife and Jake going along the hall, then the woman returned. She sat down opposite Devoe, folded her hands in her lap and half closed her eyes. She seemed to be thinking.

Devoe wet his lips. "We can't trust him," he murmured.

"No," she replied. "He must be got rid of. Both of them."

Devoe stiffened. "Not Harry!" he said sharply. "It's not his fault. I won't have it! I'd give up everything first!"

She motioned to the whisky bottle. "Drink," she said.

Devoe slumped. He glanced at the bottle and looked away.

"I won't have it, Minerva," he said in a weak voice. "Not Harry. Jake is a different matter. Mebbe a word to Jean Targen would be in order."

"Are you crazy?" She jerked around. "Do you think Jean would kill him without finding out why?"

"Well, I could tell him somethin'."

"You could tell him?" She laughed jeeringly. *"Jake's* the one who'd tell him! Jean would see to that. No! We've got to keep him out of this. Not a word to Jean! Understand?"

Devoe nervously rubbed his palms on his coat.

She narrowed her eyes. "You've already said something to Jean!"

Devoe shook his head protestingly. "No, I haven't, not exactly. All I told him was that if he should meet Jake sometime and didn't like his looks mebbe he could do somethin' about it."

"You idiot!" she cried savagely. "Where's Jean now?"

"I don't know, Minerva. At the bunkhouse, I reckon."

But he was talking to the empty

office; his wife had left. He could hear her running toward the back of the house.

Devoe reached for the bottle and took a drink. The whisky had lost its fire. It went down like water. He leaned his head on his hands and when he shut his eyes he could see the stony features of his wife. His nerves were jumping. He had an impulse to bang his head against the wall. He clenched his fists and arose, paced rapidly back and forth. His nerves quieted somewhat as he could feel the whisky beginning to take hold.

He was standing by the bookcase when Minerva came back to the office.

"Jean's gone," she said in a clipped, level tone, "and no one knows where. I sent Bob to town to see if he's there. We've got to find him and keep him away from Jake."

Devoe nodded. His composure now matched his wife's. "Yes," he agreed, "he must be found."

"I told one of the men to saddle Star for you. There's a chance that Jean saw Jake here and is following him. You'll have to ride after him. Out to that little place of Harry Severn's."

"Yes," said Devoe. "I'll go right away." He picked up his hat from the bookcase.

"Wait!" She rushed to the desk, opened a drawer and took out a gun. "Here!"

Devoe thrust the gun under his belt and then gazed stupidly down at it. "What's this for?"

"For Jake. It's got to be done right away before Jean or anyone else can get to him. *You've* got to do it!"

Devoe recoiled a step. "No!" he cried hoarsely.

Her lip thinned and raised, showing long, strong teeth. "You spineless idiot," she said softly "You half-a-man! Must I do it myself? Now get going! Hurry!" Of a sudden her face went whitely furious. She lifted clawed hands as if to spring like a tigress.

From the house to the barn Devoe managed to control his gait to a walk. He got onto his saddle horse. Ordinarily he would never think of running a cold mount. But now, with his feet in the stirrups and the house well behind him, he experienced a chilled shrinking at the base of his spine. He yelled at his horse and spurred senselessly.

For a time—he had no notion for how long—Devoe rode with his eyes shut and his mouth open. The wind rushed into his mouth and he shouted it out again. The shouting served as a physical release, vocal expression for his whole, quivering nervous system.

The horse swerved and a thin branch whipped across Devoe's nose. The stinging lash startled Devoe and brought him more or less to his senses. He halted his horse and peered about.

He had, Devoe now discovered, come a considerable distance out of his way. He turned his horse and proceeded at a more conventional pace.

A half-hour later he was standing beneath the big bullpine by Harry Severn's little ramshackle barn. Beyond, dim in the moon shadow, he could see the head of Jake Hogan's horse lifted questioningly above the corral poles. On the other side of Devoe was the shack, a knife-edge of light showing at the base of the drawn window blind.

Devoe left his horse under the bullpine and approached the shack on foot. His stride was light and resolute, the stride of a man who has committed himself past all hope of retreat. In his hand he held the gun.

He reached the door and without the slightest hesitation pushed it open and stepped inside. Very nearly he stepped upon the reclining figure of Jake Hogan. Someone had recently placed a bullet-hole between Jake's eyes.

Devoe's first reaction was a feeling of relief that he had been saved a nasty job. He stuffed his gun back under his belt and gazed down at the dead man in somber contemplation. Then his reason began to work. Who had killed Jake? The answer was obvious—Jean Targen had done it. The very thing which Cole Devoe had sought to prevent, had occurred. Jean had got to Jake first!

How much information had Jean forced out of Jake Hogan before he killed him? What use would Jean make of that information? How now to get rid of Jean?

XVI

QUESTIONS multiplied in Devoe's mind with terrifying rapidity. He turned and left the shack, started to run, his legs picking up the tempo of his whirling, despairing thoughts. He

flung himself into saddle.

Right now his wife was the last person in the world Devoe wanted to face. He headed for Brinker City and the counsel of Fern Kemp.

After a short distance of break-neck riding, his panic subsided somewhat and he slowed his horse. As he approached town his mood became one of gloomy resignation. He had been chevied to the brink of ruin. Now, feeling himself helpless, he achieved a sort of cool detachment. He was, so to speak, braced for the plunge.

When he left Severn's place Devoe had cut directly across the rangeland. A mile from town he came out on North Pass road. Here he met a horseman. He recognized the large shape of his son.

Bob halted and peered uncertainly in the night light. "Dad?"

"It's me." Devoe was mildly surprised at his own calmness.

Bob moved closer. "I couldn't find Jean in town. I don't think he's here. Is it important?"

"No," replied Devoe. "Not now. It's all right."

"You goin' to town, Dad?"

"Yes," said Devoe. Suddenly he felt a strange warmth of affection toward this weakling son of his. Quietly he asked: "What happened today, Bob? Are yuh in trouble? Did Severn get yuh into it?"

"What? I don't know what yuh mean, Dad!" Abruptly the boy ceased speaking. He was silent a moment, then he straightened in the saddle. "Yes," he said. "Only Harry didn't get me into it. He got me out of it."

"That rustlin' business, wasn't it?"

Bob bent his head. "Yes," he answered in a low voice.

"I hope yuh've had yore lesson. Yuh better go home now, son."

Bob jerked up his head. "Ain't yuh goin' to do anything about it?"

"No," Devoe cut in gently, "I'm not going to do anything about it. I've made mistakes, too, son. I . . . Well—" On impulse Devoe reached in his pocket and pulled out his buckskin purse. He had no notion how much money it contained — twenty dollars — a hundred. "Here," he cried a bit wildly. "Take this! Spend it on anything—drink, women, cards—anything! Now good night, son."

Devoe left his amazed son halted in the middle of the road with the purse in his hands. The cattleman went on to Brinker City.

He stabled his horse in the carriage shed and used his key to enter the white-painted house. He strode through the darkened hallway, saw a light at the top of the stairs. Fern's voice came down sharply to him:

"Who's that?"

"Me—Cole. Where's Tess?"

"She's gone for the night. Her sister's sick."

Devoe climbed the stairs. He pushed Fern ahead of him into the lighted bedroom, glanced at the French clock and was astonished to find that it was not yet midnight. Fern was wearing a green silk wrap-around. Her cheeks and the fingers of her right hand glistened greasily. Devoe surmised that she'd been chasing wrinkles.

She stared at him questioningly. "What's happened?"

"Everything." Devoe dropped down on the lace spread of her big four-poster bed. "I'm tired," he said wearily.

"It's Harry Severn!" she cried. "Is that it, Cole?"

"Yes," said Devoe. "That's it, partly. How'd yuh guess?"

"He was here yesterday afternoon."

"So?" Devoe laughed lightly. "Sociable rascal, ain't he? Do yuh know who Harry Severn really is?"

"I do now. And he knows I'm his mother."

"Eh!" Devoe sat bolt upright.

Fern smiled enigmatically. "That's what he knows, Cole. Also—now listen to this—he knows that Jake Hogan is his father."

"That's not news. Jake told me that this evenin'."

Fern's green eyes widened. "Then Jake knows who Severn is, too!"

"He did know. But he don't now. Jake's dead. Shot."

'Oh-h." She gave him a long glance. "Jean?"

"I'm afraid so."

FERN seated herself at her dressing table. She began wiping the lotion from her cheeks. Her movements became slower. She frowned at Devoe in the pier-glass.

"Why'd you say that, about being afraid so?" she asked.

"Because, my dear, I'm afraid that

Jean may have pumped Jake before he shot him. I'm afraid now that Jean knows everything that our friend Jake knew."

Fern spun around. "Are you sure he does?"

"Fairly shore. I know Jean pretty well."

"That's bad. Jean'll be a hard man to handle."

"Plumb hard. Impossible, I'd say."

"Something's got to be done!"

Devoe smiled wryly. "Should I try shootin' Jean? D'yuh think I could beat the professional at his own game?"

Fern was silent, clasping and twisting her hands.

Devoe lay back and shut his eyes. "I wish," he said fretfully, "that I could sleep."

There was another silence, then Devoe heard Fern approaching the bed.

"I'll think of something," she said energetically. "I'll sit up all night thinking. Now go home before Minerva finds out where you've been."

"Minerva!" Devoe shuddered.

"Does she know about Severn, too?"

"Yes. She's the one who found out first. There's a mark on his back that she recognized. She'll kill him, Fern! In the end she's goin' to kill all of us. She's a devil, Fern. A—a monster!" Devoe shuddered again. In a low, positive voice he said: "I can't go home. I'm afraid to go home."

Fern left the room. She returned to the bed with two small pills and a glass of water.

"Take these," she ordered.

Devoe took the pills. He patted Fern's hand. "Thanks, my dear. Is it strychnine?"

"No," answered Fern. "When the time comes for that, Cole, we'll take it together. Now try to sleep."

She gently pushed him down on the bed and went back to her dressing table.

Devoe lay quiet. He watched Fern with half-closed eyes. She was rubbing her cheeks again.

After a time she said softly: "We could go away, Cole. We could just go away and change our names."

"No," said Devoe drearily. "I can't even run away. I have two children. I can't desert 'em. I'm afraid, but I'm not a coward."

Fern alertly cocked her head. "Did you lock the door when you came in?"

"I don't remember lockin' it."

"I thought I heard something."

"Imagination, my dear. Yuh're nervous, too."

Fern tip-toed out of the room.

Devoe settled himself drowsily. He could hear Fern's cautious tread on the dark stairway. Suddenly she screamed.

* * * * *

Jean Targen had just returned to Devoe's ranch headquarters after a trip to Harry Severn's little place near North Pass. Jean put his horse in the barn and propelled his pudgy body toward the house.

Duffy, the cantankerous old cook, was smoking a before-bed pipe in front of the cookshack as Jean trudged by, and Jean gave him an unusually genial greeting. At the moment Jean felt a great love for humanity. He was suffused with a warm glow of complacency. He had, in his own estimation, accomplished this night a good stroke of business. A good stroke indeed!

Jean was a craftsman. The tools of his trade were a gun and an absolute fearlessness. In his apprentice days Jean had taken great pride in matching his growing skill against fellow craftsmen. He always had been most scrupulous in observance of the gunfighter's punctilio—the insult, the face-to-face challenge and the matched draw.

Since Jean invariably triumphed in his combats, the satisfaction of a vanity killing had begun to pall. In late years it was only the most formidable of his victims whom Jean honored with a chance for an even draw. Ordinary, trade-job killings Jean performed by whatever method seemed handiest at the time.

For a healthy man without noticeable religious tendencies, Jean Targen led a fairly austere life. He seldom drank, he paid little attention to women, and he didn't care for cards. He did, though, have one secret indulgence—he liked to converse with doomed men. The dilated gaze, the sweated brow, the tangled, pleading tongue—all this gave Jean a pleasurable sense of tremendous power.

Also, it could be enlightening. Tonight was a case in point. His conversation with old Jake Hogan had been extremely enlightening. In fact, it was the most enlightening, power-tingling conversation Jean ever had held.

SMILING to himself, he briskly mounted the steps and crossed Devoe's wide front gallery. Without bothering to knock, he opened the door, entered the house, and strode confidently along the hallway. He saw a light under the office door. He opened that door.

Minerva Devoe was in the office, seated at Devoe's desk. In a sharp voice she cried:

"Where've you been? What d'you mean by walking in like this?"

Jean lost a bit of his assurance, for he had expected to find Devoe in the office. He hesitated, then pushed on in and shut the door behind him.

"Where's Cole?" he asked.

"He's not here."

Jean noticed that the woman did not pursue her line of questioning. Her manner had changed and there was a wariness about her now. He also noticed red tooth marks on her lower lip. It was evident that she was controlling a violent agitation.

Jean's confidence returned. He sat down and crossed his legs.

"I've got that information yuh wanted," he remarked casually.

"What information?"

"What yuh asked me to find out for yuh before yuh went East this last time —about Mrs. Eugene Cummings."

"Oh, that! Well? Is he still seeing her?"

"When you're away, yes."

The woman made a grinding noise with her teeth.

"Her real name," Jean went on concisely, "is Fern Kemp. It's my notion she came here first to blackmail Cole. After a while they got to be such good friends that there was no question of blackmail. Would yuh know what she could blackmail Cole about?"

"No," replied Minerva Devoe. "And don't try to trip me up with surprise questions," she warned. "Get on with what you know."

"Fern Kemp," Jean continued imperturbably, "was raised on an Illinois farm. When she was sixteen she ran away with a Mississippi River gambler. Since then she's—"

"How'd you find out all this?"

Jean modestly lowered his gaze. "I have friends here and there," he murmured. "White friends, black, red."

"All right! Never mind! Go on!"

"Twenty-five years ago she shot a man just the other side of the mountains from here. The law got after her and she had to run for it. She had a baby with her." Jean paused. He saw the woman's long teeth creeping down over her underlip. "She abandoned the baby," he said abruptly, "to an ex-rustler named Jake Hogan."

The woman released her lip. "Now how," she asked in a coldly curious tone, "could you have found that out?"

Jean smiled. This was the moment he had been waiting for.

"I've just had a little talk with Jake Hogan," he announced quietly.

XVII

MINERVA DEVOE came out of her chair. So explosive was her movement, so viciously contorted were her features that Jean dropped his hand to his gun. The woman recaptured her self-possession. Her face assumed a stony calm and she sank back in her chair.

At once Jean fired another shot. "*Now*," he asked, "would yuh know what Fern Kemp could blackmail Cole about?"

"Yes," she answered. "How much did Jake tell you? I suppose, by the way, that he's dead now."

"Dead as a herrin'! And he told me a lot. Enough that I know you want to get rid of Harry Severn."

"How much is that going to cost?"

"A cool ten thousand. Payable as of now."

"Ten thousand! D'you think I'm a gold mine?"

"I'm reasonable," said Jean mildly. "If you ain't got the cash handy, I'll settle for an I.O.U. as of now!"

Minerva Devoe gazed steadily at the gunman. Her eyes had taken on a peculiar glazed appearance. The iris seemed to have contracted so that the whites showed a full circle.

"All right," she said in a harsh tone. "Maybe we can do business."

She snatched pen and paper from the desk and wrote rapidly. She handed to Jean the paper which read:

I hereby acknowledge a debt of $10,000 to Jean Targen.

Minerva Devoe

"And don't try to collect on that without delivering," she warned coldly.

Jean folded the paper and stuck it in his pocket. He wagged a finger at the woman. "And don't you," he said, "try to welsh on it after I do deliver. If yuh do, I start talkin'."

"I'm not likely to welsh on it. I have some more jobs for you."

"Yeah? Who else?"

"Everybody who knows anything about this business."

"And how many's that?" Jean asked cautiously.

"Fern Kemp, for one."

"No, yuh don't!" Jean shook his head. "No women!"

Her lip curled scornfully. "Then I'll do it. You take Duffy."

"Not old Duffy! The cook?"

"Yes. He's been here a long time. He was here when Jason Porter was alive. I've never been sure how much he knows. Duffy's got to be killed. He's old anyway. It don't matter much. A thousand for him."

Jean felt that the office was growing warm. He had known that Minerva was a tough customer. Now, though, she was looming up in a new and uncomfortable perspective. She was a bit tougher than he had imagined.

"Duffy it is then," he said weakly. "But I hate to do it." His manner became caustic. "Any more? How about Cole?"

Once again he saw the flash of fury across her features. "No!" she cried chokingly. "I'd get nothing. The children get everything. He showed me his will."

Jean nodded understandingly. "Smart man," he commented drily.

Mentally he made a note that he would play smart, too. From now on he would be mighty careful when going around dark corners.

The woman stood up. "Let's go," she said energetically. "We might as well get it over with now."

"Get what over with?"

"Harry Severn, of course. He's been hurt. He's lying in Bob's room right this minute."

"Yuh want me to do it now?" exclaimed the gunman. "Here!"

"Certainly. Why not? Bob and Cole are away."

Jean gripped his chair. Events were speeding up with bewildering rapidity.

"And what," he asked feebly, "do yuh expect to tell a jury? I was seen comin' in here. Have yuh thought of that?"

"Certainly I've thought of it. He attacked me, and you killed him to save me. That's the story we'll tell."

"And yuh expect 'em to believe it? That Severn attacked *you?*"

She looked at him with her queer, creepy eyes. "Is there any reason why a jury *wouldn't* believe it?" she inquired coldly.

"No," said Jean hastily. "It's just that it would seem odd."

"Are you afraid?"

JEAN didn't deign to reply. He arose in dignified silence.

The woman smiled faintly. "You wait here," she ordered. "I'll go into his room and scream. Then you come running. Mrs. Fenner and Alice both will hear the scream. They'll have to back up our story."

Jean shook his head in slow wonder. "Ma'am," he said feelingly, "if the devil ever takes a bride, you'll be it." He bowed with ironic gallantry and opened the door.

Minerva Devoe started to leave, then stopped.

Mrs. Fenner was coming along the hallway. She turned a puzzled acid face toward the two.

"He's gone," she complained. "I don't know when."

"Who's gone?"

"Harry Severn is. I fixed up the room like you said, and now he ain't in it."

"You brainless scut! You mean you let him get away?"

"Get away?" The housekeeper opened her eyes in injured astonishment. "I wasn't trying to keep him. And don't you call me a name like that!"

With a strangling cry Minerva Devoe hurled herself at the housekeeper and seized her by the hair. Mrs. Fenner waved her arms wildly, bleating with terror.

Jean rushed by the struggling women, hurried through the hallway and out the back door. In the dark outside he ran into Alice Devoe. The girl was sobbing.

He gripped her shoulder. "Where's Severn?" he asked fiercely.

The surprised girl pointed mutely to the barn.

"How long since he left?"

"Ten—fifteen m-minutes ago. I d-don't know how long."

Jean released her and hustled on. Old

Duffy was still in front of the cookshack. He shouted something after Jean, and Jean didn't bother to listen. He went into the barn and saddled a horse.

It was Jean's notion that Severn probably had gone to his place near North Pass, so Jean rode in that direction. When he was within a mile of Severn's place, he heard a distant shot. He stopped to listen. Then he heard the drum of hoofs. Somewhere in the night there was a fast running horse. The sound came closer, then receded as if the horse, turning, was now headed for Brinker City.

Jean went on, then stopped again. He heard more horses. They were coming straight toward him. A group of riders appeared on the rise just ahead. The horsemen halted, surrounding Jean.

Ted Gamboy spoke out of the dark: "What're you doin' here?"

"Ridin'," Jean answered coolly. "What're you doin'?"

"We're huntin' Harry Severn." Sheriff Trimble pushed forward. "Did he come this way?"

"What's he done?" countered Jean.

"Killed a man. Some old range tramp. Out at Severn's place. I don't know who he was. . . Did you see Severn?"

Jean shook his head. "No, but I heard him goin' by. He turned on yuh. He was headin' for town."

Instantly Trimble wheeled his horse. "Come on!" he shouted.

The posse followed the sheriff. Jean took out after the group and joined it. He was smiling to himself.

The riders cut across range until they reached North Pass road. A solitary horseman was approaching them. They challenged him. The horseman was young Bob Devoe.

"Bob, did anybody pass yuh goin' toward town?" asked Trimble.

"Yuh mean Dad?"

"No. Anybody else?"

"I thought I heard somebody. Off there." Bob pointed.

"Hey!" someone called suddenly. "Who's this one?"

Another rider was approaching the halted posse, coming up from behind as if he had been following it. Jean stared. He recognized the small, slumped shape of old Duffy, the cook.

In the momentary diversion created by the arrival of old Duffy, young Bob Devoe moved close to Jean.

"They found the cattle, Jean," he said in a low voice. "They almost got me."

"Tell me later," Jean interrupted impatiently. "Go on home."

"Who're they after now? How'd you get in with this bunch?"

"Never mind. Go on home. Get out of here."

Bob sighed and moved slowly off.

DUFFY, in response to the challenge of the posse, was proclaiming belligerently that he was a free citizen and could go where and when he pleased and didn't have to answer questions from anyone. He also stated his intention of joining the posse.

"I'm old," he said, "but I ain't scared of nothin'. And there ain't nobody goin' to stop me!"

Jean Targen didn't wait to hear the rest of old Duffy's declamation. He eased himself away from the others. After a short distance of quietly walking his horse, he used spurs. The horse was comparatively fresh and it was fast, one of Devoe's quarter-strain runners. Jean was sure now that he would reach town well before the posse.

Severn, so Jean thought, if he was heading for town, would try to take refuge in one of two places — Sam Teller's house or the residence of Fern Kemp. Jean had seen and noted Severn's call upon Fern Kemp yesterday. He decided to go to Fern's place first.

There was a light behind the drawn shade of one of the upstairs rooms at the Plummer Street house. Jean dismounted and led his horse on the soft lawn by the driveway. A saddler was tied at the corner of the carriage shed. The horse belonged to Devoe, but the rigging was Harry Severn's.

Jean Targen tied his horse beside the other and paused to take off his spurs. He went to the rear of the house and tried the door. It was unlocked. Jean entered the house and gently closed the door. He was in darkness. He stretched his hands before him and moved on silent feet. Then he stopped. He heard light footsteps overhead.

Suddenly a woman screamed.

XVIII

ONLY a few minutes after Mrs. Devoe had bid Harry Severn good night,

Bob Devoe returned to the bedroom where Severn lay.

"How yuh doing?" he asked.

Severn, stretched out on the bed, grunted. "Good, I guess."

"Want a drink?" Bob produced a bottle from a bureau drawer.

Severn sat up and grimaced. He took a pull at the bottle.

"Lie down again," ordered Bob. "I'll be back after while."

Severn lay down again. Bob turned the lamp low and went out.

Whisky, Severn decided fifteen minutes later, was the correct medicine. He was feeling stronger already. He began to take stock of his condition. His head was sore to the touch, but beyond that he had suffered no serious damage in the fall from his horse. The bullet furrow across his ribs burned with just enough heat to let him know it was there.

Actually, as he discovered when he twisted his body, the tight bandage Bob had wrapped around him bothered him more than the wound did. His queasiness was gone altogether—shocked out of him, he supposed, by that strange, ferocious glance Mrs. Devoe had bent upon him as she had left the room.

Why had that stony-featured woman looked at him in that way? Why her agitation at seeing his bared back?

Bob Devoe poked his head back into the room. "Got to go to town on an errand for Mother," he explained hastily. "You lie quiet. I'll be back." He glanced behind him and lowered his voice. "I've told Alice everything that happened. She's makin' yuh some broth."

"All right." Severn grinned. "I'm not that feeble."

Bob waved and departed. In his hurry he left the door ajar.

Severn lay with one arm partly across his closed eyes. He wondered what urgency could have caused Mrs. Devoe to send Bob to town at this time of evening. And why again had she looked at him, Harry Severn, in such a peculiarly venomous manner?

He remembered what Duffy had said about Devoe's wife. She was, so the old cook had said, the one person he was afraid of. Maybe he wasn't so crazy at that. Maybe Duffy knew what he was talking about.

Severn heard the lightest possible of sounds in the hall outside the door. His eyes, shadowed by his arm, opened just enough so that he could peer through his lashes. He saw the door, left ajar by Bob, being slowly pushed inward. In the widening aperture appeared the pallid, high-nosed face of Minerva Devoe.

For a time she stared expressionlessly at the apparently sleeping man. Then her strange eyes narrowed and her lips showed a faint smile, a smile that seemed somehow to be more frightful in its implication than her former glance of hatred. She withdrew her head and softly shut the door.

Severn's hair was prickling. He wondered if the goosebumps on his exposed chest had been noticeable. At that moment he arrived at one definite decision —he was *not* going to stay in this house the remainder of the night! He was going to get out of here as quickly and quietly as he could. He sat up and reached for his boots.

By the time Severn was fully clothed he heard someone stirring about in the next room—Mrs. Fenner, he supposed, making up the bed for him. He opened the door and looked out. He left the room and tiptoed along the hall to the back of the house. He landed in the Devoe's large and elaborately equipped kitchen.

A lamp burned here. Something in a burnished copper pot was simmering on the stove. Alice Devoe, evidently catching a breath of cool night air, was standing by the opened outside door. She turned and gave a startled exclamation.

"What're you doing here?" she cried. "You're supposed to be in bed. Bob said you were staying all night."

"I can't. I've got some business I've got to tend to."

"You're making that up, Harry. Something's the matter."

"No." Severn shook his head doggedly. "It's just that I got to leave. Tell yore mother for me, Alice, will yuh?"

At mention of her mother a change came over the girl. Her eyes blanked and she seemed to retreat within herself.

"All right," she said in a dead tone. "I'll tell her."

Severn moved past her and into the outside gloom.

"Harry! Wait!" Alice rushed after

him. "Whatever's happened between you and mother, it's not going to make any difference between us, is it?" she asked fiercely.

HE looked at her. Her face upturned, was a soft blur in the darkness. She was a nice girl, but a wilful one. She was Devoe's daughter. She was a barrelful of money—and she was Severn's for the wanting.

Was money so important, after all? How happy was Cole Devoe? How many meals could you eat at one time? How many beds could you sleep in at one time? What was a fair cash price for a man's self-respect?

Peg Teller might have the right, smart answers for those questions, but Harry Severn knew now that he didn't have them. He never had had them—not the right answers. Somewhere along the line there had been a twist in his rough, tough schooling, a wrong twist.

"No," he said to the girl, "it's not yore mother that makes a difference between us. It's somebody else. It's Tom Bailey."

"That farmer!" Alice stiffened. "Whatever makes you think that?"

"There's worse things than farmers. A lot worse."

"I hate him! I wish you'd let Jean kill him! I'd like to do it myself!"

"Hush! Yuh don't mean any of those things." Suddenly he felt infinitely older and wiser than this young girl. He put his hands on her shoulders. "I think," he said gently, "that yuh love him. What do you think, Alice?"

The stiffening slowly went out of her. Her shoulders trembled.

"I hate you!" she whispered. "Not him, but you. I could kill you!"

"I know. Yuh hate me because I've made yuh admit the truth to yoreself. It works that way. Well . . . Luck, Alice. And good-by." He went on toward the barn.

As he passed the cookshack, old Duffy's voice called to him guardedly:

"Harry? Jean Targen just went in the front a while ago."

"All right. I'm not lookin' for him."

"I just thought I'd tell yuh. You listen to everything I tell yuh, and yuh'll be a smarter man. Mebbe yuh'll live longer."

"All right." Severn nodded indulgently. "Thanks, Duffy."

Severn found his saddle gear behind the grain bin in the horse barn where Bob had hidden it. He took a mount from the first occupied box stall he came to, left Devoe's ranch and headed for his own place near North Pass. . . .

By the corner of his canted little barn Severn halted and dismounted. Immediately he sensed something wrong here. Jake Hogan's old horse was moving about restlessly in the corral. The shack door was open, sending a fan of yellow lamp glow into the night.

Severn scowled at the open doorway. The figure of a man showed there. The man left the shack and started running. He ran into the blackness beneath the big bullpine, then reappeared. He was now on horseback and spurring desperately. He roared off in a bee-line direction toward Brinker City and was swallowed by the shadows. Belatedly Severn realized that the man had been Cole Devoe.

Severn tied his horse by the barn and warily stalked the shack. He looked in through the open door, then entered the shack and leaned moodily against the wall.

Alive, Jake Hogan had been mean in spirit and unlovely in physique. Now, sprawled on the floor, eyes slightly popped from the explosive pressure of the bullet between them, he had achieved death without dignity. Harry Severn viewed the corpse dispassionately. He had no doubt that Devoe had killed Jake. But why had he done it?

On second thought, Severn wondered why he had heard no shot. Evidently Jake had been killed while Severn was still some distance away. But why, if Devoe had done the killing, had he stayed around the shack so long afterward?

There were more second thoughts. Jake had mentioned Cole Devoe once or twice. Had Jake had some hold over Devoe? Had he been blackmailing Devoe? If so, on what grounds?

Then Severn had the most startling thought of all. Was there a possibility that Jake Hogan was not his father after all? Was there the possibility that Devoe himself, so close to Fern Kemp, was his father?

Abruptly Severn lifted his head. He had heard horses. Hastily he ducked out of the shack and slammed the door. He had nearly reached the barn when

a body of riders swept into sight.

"Halt!" someone cried. "Stand still!"

Severn halted, plastered against the corral gate.

"That you, Harry?" Sheriff Trimble rode close. "How long yuh been here, Harry?"

"For a while," Severn answered evasively.

"Didn't see two fellers goin' by here, did yuh? At just about dark. Most likely they were in a hurry."

"No." said Severn.

THERE was a moment of silence after this. The horsemen pushed in about Severn. He could feel their hostility and dark skepticism.

"All right, boys, don't crowd the man!" said Trimble sharply. "Move on a little. I'll talk to Harry."

The riders behind Trimble faded back. They milled in a slow, restless group toward the shack.

"We got two of 'em, Harry," Trimble said quietly.

"The rustlers Gamboy told yuh about?"

"That's right. And two got away. Shore yuh didn't see 'em?"

Severn didn't reply. Inwardly he groaned. Out of the tail of his eye he saw that one of the posse had dismounted. It looked like Otto Krantz. Krantz was at the door, he was opening it.

"Harry—" began Trimble in a determined voice.

"Hey!" bellowed Krantz. "What is this? Here is a dead man!"

Trimble swung around. Severn darted past him and to the shadowed corner of the barn. He jerked loose his tied horse and sprang into the saddle. He raced away on the old wagon trail that came out on North Pass road. The posse took after him. A gun cracked.

Beyond that single shot, there was no more firing. By the time Severn had crossed North Pass road, the posse, horses weary from the day's riding, was hopelessly outdistanced. Severn went a short way on, then halted to listen. He heard no sound of pursuit.

At once Severn changed his direction, following a course parallel to North Pass road. He was now heading toward Brinker City and Fern Kemp's house on Plummer Street. He had a strong hunch that he would find Cole Devoe there.

Once he had reached town, Severn saw a light behind the drawn shade of one of the second floor windows at the Plummer Street house. He walked his horse over the lawn to the carriage shed and dismounted. Inside the shed was a Boxed D saddler. Severn tied his own mount by the corner of the shed, approached the rear door of the house and tested it. The door was unlocked. He entered the house and softly closed the door.

The darkness here was almost complete. He pushed forward, his spurs making a faint jingling noise. One of them hooked on a carpet edge, and he stumbled. He stopped and held his breath. Then he heard voices overhead and went on.

Before Severn was a stairway with light from an open door showing at the top. At once Severn stopped again. Fern Kemp was coming down the stairs on tiptoe. Suddenly she saw Severn. She screamed.

Severn snatched out his gun, bounded up the stairs past Fern and halted in the open doorway. Before him was a bedroom cluttered with feminine bric-a-brac and lighted by two rose-shaded lamps. Seated rigidly on the edge of a large four-poster bed was Cole Devoe.

Devoe looked into Severn's dark, hard features and he looked into the barrel of a drawn gun. He smiled wanly.

"Well?" he said.

Severn made a jabbing motion. "Pull that gun out of your belt with yore thumb and one finger!" he ordered brusquely. "Drop it on the floor and kick it under the bed."

Devoe dropped his gun and kicked it under the bed.

Fern Kemp brushed by Severn, came into the room and sat down at her dressing table, facing the two men. She seemed to be calm now. She looked brightly at Severn.

"You wanted something, Harry?"

"I want to know why Cole killed Jake Hogan!"

"So that's it!" Devoe shook his head. "I didn't kill him."

"I saw yuh ridin' away from my shack."

"But yuh didn't see me kill him. If yuh don't believe me, examine that gun under the bed. It hasn't been fired in a year."

"Then who did kill him?"

"I don't know," said Devoe promptly. "I rode up to yore shack and found him dead, so I rode away again."

"What was yuh doin' at my shack?"

Devoe rubbed his palms on his coat. "That," he said curtly. "is my business. Yuh're not a lawman anymore."

"You're being tiresome, Harry." Fern pushed out her lips. "And *do* put away that gun! You ought to know you can't threaten Cole."

Severn felt baffled. All at once he was conscious of the ridiculous, melodramatic figure he must cut in this totally feminine room. He looked at Fern in her green silk wrapper, her white hair piled high above her incongruously youthful face.

"Here," he thought grimly, "is my mother." He looked at Cole Devoe. "And here—" he thought.

He holstered his gun. "One question," he said doggedly. "Who was my father? Jake Hogan or you?"

He pointed at Devoe. Devoe didn't reply to Severn.

XIX

EYES set and staring. Fern Kemp was motionless at her dressing table. Suddenly Severn became aware that they were not looking at him but at some point a little behind him. He started convulsively as cool metal touched the nape of his neck.

"Don't look around, Harry!" The chuckling voice of Jean Targen said, almost in his ear. "Walk straight over to that kind of a sofa there, then set down and put yore hands on yore knees."

Severn walked steadily to the chaise longue, sat down and put his hands on his knees. He gazed dismally at Jean Targen.

Jean, it was evident, was in great good humor. He posed in the doorway, holding his gun negligently, his round blue eyes sparkling and pleased.

"First," he said with the brisk air of one disposing of tedious formalities, "I want it understood that anybody makin' a wrong move gets shot."

"What yuh mean by comin' in here like this?" Devoe asked hollowly. "What yuh doin' here?"

"Business," said Jean. "Official business for yore wife."

Devoe shivered. He cast an agonized glance at Fern. Fern, apparently, had lost interest in what was going on. She had clasped her hands in her lap and was frowning pensively at the tips of her slippers.

Jean strode into the room, swept the door shut behind him and settled himself in the nearest chair. He held his gun pointed at Severn.

"Now this," he said comfortably, "is the way I like to do business. Everybody quiet and sensible and nobody excited." He smiled maliciously. "You ain't excited, are yuh, Harry?"

"No," said Severn.

Jean kept smiling. "Sometimes," he said, "they think they're keepin' cool and calm, and yuh can see nerves twitchin' all over 'em. By the way, Harry, ain't that somethin' twitchin' in yore cheek?"

Severn smiled back at him. "I got a wild hair," he said.

Jean scowled. It was plain that the answer didn't please him.

"I suppose," said Severn, "that yore business is with me."

"That's right, Harry." Jean brightened. "No hurry, though. I like to do these things sociable. Tie up all loose ends first. For instance, I heard yuh askin' who killed Jake Hogan."

"I can guess now," said Severn wearily. "You did."

"Right. Likewise, I heard yuh askin' who yore old man was."

Devoe uttered an inarticulate cry.

Jean shook his head reprovingly. "Don't get yoreself in an uproar, Cole. It ain't goin' to hurt now for him to find out who he is. *He* ain't goin' to get any good out of it!"

Severn bent forward. "Who was it?" he demanded hoarsely.

"Jason Porter, of course. You know who Jason Porter was, don't yuh? He's the one Cole inherited all his rocks from. Jason was yore old man. It's yore rocks that Cole inherited, Harry. Right, Cole?"

Devoe didn't speak. He didn't need to speak. His pale, sweating face was answer enough. Severn looked at Fern. She still was frowning at the tips of her slippers.

Jean Targen laughed delightedly. "No, Harry," he said. "She ain't yore ma, if that's what yuh're thinkin'. Yore ma was Mrs. Jason Porter, all proper and legal. Right, Fern Kemp?"

At mention of her name, Fern stirred

slightly. "Yes," she answered. She lifted her head. "Tell him now!" she cried suddenly and savagely. "Tell him the whole thing!"

"I can't," Jean said. "All I know is what Jake Hogan told me. What I want to know is how you got hold of Harry in the first place."

The woman bent her head again. "I found him," she said in a low voice. "It was raining and dark. I thought I heard a baby crying. I couldn't believe it at first."

"That was below Black-hole Canyon."

"Yes. Several miles below. There'd been a flood higher up and in one place the water had come as far as the trail. That's how I found Harry. His dress had been snagged on the branch of a windfall pine and he was hanging there and crying. He must have been carried miles that way until the windfall was stranded by the trail."

"Yuh didn't know who he was?"

"No," said Fern. "I thought he must belong to some washed-out nester family. I just bundled him under my slicker and went on. I was in a hurry. I stopped at Jake Hogan's cabin that night. When I went on next morning, I left the baby there. Jake's wife, I guess, thought the baby was mine. I didn't tell her any different."

JEAN'S eyes were on her steadily.

"And then?" he prompted.

"And after that," said Fern, "I was in a good many places. I forgot all about the baby. Six years ago I drifted into these parts again. I happened to hear about the stagecoach accident at Black-hole Canyon on the night of the flood. Mrs. Jason Porter was drowned in the stage, but her baby's body hadn't been found until a month afterwards. It had been identified by Minerva Suttler. I knew something about Minerva Suttler, and it seemed to me that such an identification would be pretty hard to make after a month. And then when I heard that Cole Devoe had inherited from Porter and had married Minerva Suttler, I began to put two and two together. I wondered if Minerva Suttler hadn't made a false identification of some drowned nester baby just so Cole Devoe could inherit. So I hunted up Cole."

"To blackmail him?"

"Yes," said Fern. "But there wasn't much to work with. I had no idea what had become of Jake Hogan or the baby."

"He struck out for California the next day."

"Yes, I know that now."

"Jake Hogan," continued Jean expansively, "didn't know about that stage accident either. Not till sixteen years later. Then *he* put two and two together. But by that time Harry had run away from him. Jake set out to look for Harry so he could use him to blackmail Cole. He got into trouble somewheres and landed in the pen for eight years. When Jake got out of the pen he decided to try his hand at blackmailin' Cole without wastin' any more time lookin' for Harry. And the first person he runs into when he gets here is Harry himself. Talk about luck!" Jean shook his head wonderingly.

Severn looked down at his hands. His knuckles were ridged where he was gripping his knees. It was all clear now. Jake Hogan and Fern had pretended to be his parents because they didn't want him to know who his real parents were. Jake had wanted to use him for blackmailing Devoe. Fern, Severn guessed, had merely wanted to protect Devoe and his barrelful of money.

"What was the baby's name?" he muttered.

"Jason Robert Porter," said Fern. "That's your name, Harry."

Severn reached up to wipe his face.

Jean jabbed with his gun. "Hands, Harry! Careful!"

Severn clutched his knees again. Devoe broke into a torrent of speech.

"I didn't mean to cheat yuh, Harry! Believe me, I didn't! I really thought yuh were dead. It wasn't till years afterward that I began to suspect that my wife had—had . . . Well—" Devoe seemed to pull himself together by a tremendous effort of will. In a changed tone he said, "I still don't know that yuh're Porter's son. In my opinion—"

"In my opinion," said Jean, "it's gettin' late."

"Yes," agreed Devoe with a sort of desperate eagerness. "Late. Yuh're right, Jean. I think we should all—" He paused, stared at the smiling gunman, then leaped to his feet. "No!" he shouted wildly. "I won't have it! Not here! I forbid it!"

"Yuh'll have it," said Jean sternly, "because I'm bein' paid to do it. Now set down!"

Devoe sat down. He held his head with both hands.

"Yuh know what's comin', Harry?" said Jean.

"Yes," said Severn. "Killin'. Like with Monahan and Jake."

"No," said Jean. "With you it's goin' to be a little different. Yuh notice I've let yuh keep yore gun." He flicked his glance to one side. "Any time before that clock strikes one, yuh're privileged to try yore luck first, Harry. When it strikes, I'm goin' to try mine."

Deliberately Jean holstered his own weapon and rested his small hands on his plump knees. He leaned forward, intently scrutinizing Severn.

"Scared, Harry?"

Severn didn't answer. He wasn't scared. He wasn't even mildly excited. His emotions seemed to have gone on a vacation. His physical senses had become singularly keen, particularly his hearing. He was conscious now—loud it sounded—of the steady ticking of the clock on the shelf above him and to the right. He could hear Devoe's quick, shallow breathing. He heard the faint scrape of silk as Fern made some slight movement.

FERN, who was to the left of Jean, had resumed the contemplation of her slippers. One hand lay in her lap. The waggling of her stiffened forefinger attracted Severn's attention. The finger was pointing to her right arm which was draped across the dressing table. Under her right hand was a silver powder box.

Severn watched in veiled puzzlement as slowly, with a twisting motion, Fern removed the convex lid from the powder box. She turned the lid over and set it down silently. Her fingers inched along the dressing table and closed about a nail file.

Jean Targen did not notice what Fern's right hand was doing. He was absorbed in studying Severn. At the moment Jean had the appearance of a man who is living intensely. His color had heightened; his eyes had taken on an exceptional brilliance. There was an almost imperceptible quivering of his pudgy body as if within him some powerful spring were being wound tighter and tighter. His glance flicked again to the clock. The tip of his tongue darted across his lips.

"Half a minute yet, Harry."

Out of the corner of his eye Severn saw Fern poising the file above the metal box lid. He drew in a quiet breath and held it.

The file descended and struck a single silvery note. Instantly Severn's hand whipped to his gun.

For the briefest fraction of a second before his hand, too, went into motion, Jean Targen's eyes showed surprise.

Severn shot with his thumb knuckle touching his hip. He didn't hear Jean's gun, but he saw the flash and felt a tug at his sleeve.

Jean's gun fell to the floor. The French clock struck a single golden note. Jean looked at the clock, then his eyes slid around toward Fern in a terrible glance of accusation. His mouth opened and emitted a laugh that sounded like the whirr of a broken spring. Then he tumbled forward out of his chair.

Severn holstered his gun. His ears were ringing. Smoke, flattening into a thin cloud layer, was drifting toward the rose-shaded lamps. Devoe, chin propped on his hands, was gazing at him fixedly.

Severn looked down at his bullet-ripped coat sleeve.

"Better be sure he's dead," Fern said in a strained voice.

"I'll see," muttered Devoe.

He arose slowly as if his joints had turned old and stiff. He bent over Jean Targen, then reached back and jerked off the lace bedspread. He covered Targen with the spread and stood there uncertainly, rubbing his palms on his coat.

Severn looked at Fern. Her head was bowed as she watched with frowning interest the little pleats her fingers were building in her silk wrapper.

"He was fast," Severn said hoarsely. "Too fast for me."

"Yes," said Fern. "I knew that."

"He was surprised. That's what saved me. He wasn't expecting it when yuh hit that box lid."

"No," said Fern. "I knew he wouldn't be." She glanced up at him and smiled almost shyly. "I never had a son of my own," she murmured. A strange sadness came into her green eyes. "Watch out for time, Harry. It catches up with you. It's faster than Jean Targen."

XX

GRIMLY nodding, Severn stood there. He didn't know what to say.

Devoe cleared his throat for attention. His indecision was gone. He spoke brusquely.

"Yuh understand, Harry," he said, "that yuh can claim only half of Jason Porter's estate. By his will I inherit yore mother's share whether yuh're alive or not."

"As far as I'm concerned, yuh can keep all of it," Severn said.

"Also," Devoe continued, "yuh must realize that yuh're goin' to have a heap of trouble provin' yore identity." He scowled. "What did yuh say?"

"I said," repeated Severn clearly, "that yuh can keep all of it. I don't want any part of yore money."

Devoe shook his head. "No, yuh don't!" he said coldly. "Whatever yore scheme is, it won't work. The best thing you can do is to take a fair settlement now and call it quits. If it goes to court, I'll lick yuh. Now what do you consider a fair settlement?"

Anger at the dull incomprehension of this man blazed in Severn. He nodded grimly.

"All right. I'll tell yuh what I want. Keep Mark Trimble in as sheriff as long as he wants to stay. Quit fightin' Otto Krantz and the rest of the Horse Flats farmers and quit importin' gunmen like Jean Targen."

Devoe shuddered. "I will," he promised earnestly. "Believe me, Harry, I'll do all of that!"

"And clear me of the charge of killin' Jake Hogan. Trimble and a posse are huntin' me now for that."

"That'll be no trouble. What else?"

"Also," said Severn on sudden inspiration, "I borrowed one of yore saddle hosses tonight. I like the hoss. I'll keep it."

"Take it, and welcome. And what else?"

"And that," said Severn heavily, "is all. We're quits. Yuh've heard every last thing I want. Want me to put it in writin'?"

Devoe stared helplessly.

Fern sighed. "He means it, Cole," she said gently. "You don't understand it, but that's what he means. . . Are you going to stay around here, Harry?"

"No!" replied Severn. "I'm goin' to sell my place and get out of this valley just as fast as I can."

"I'll buy yore place," said Devoe. "Ten thousand dollars!"

"Eh? I paid only six hundred."

"I'll still give yuh ten thousand for it. It's worth it to me."

"Let him, Harry," muttered Fern. "Be a little charitable."

Severn looked hard at Devoe. He guessed that it wasn't so much land as conscience-ease that Cole Devoe was trying to buy now.

"All right," he said with faint contempt. "It's a deal."

"What's that?" cried Fern.

There was a trampling of horses in the street and by the house.

"I think that Trimble's posse has found me," said Severn.

There was a pounding on the front door and Trimble's voice crying:

"Open up! This is the law! Who's in there? Open up!"

"I'll tend to this," said Devoe. He marched out of the room.

Severn and Fern looked at each other. They could hear Devoe at the door talking in a low tone. Then there was talking outside, and Severn heard horses moving off down the street.

"Trimble's sending them away."

"Sounds like it."

"He's not a bad man," said Fern softly. "Cole, I mean. It's just that he's —well, he's a little weak in some ways. He's like a man that's got the gambling fever. Nothing else matters."

Severn nodded, although he was sure Fern was wrong. Devoe was not, in his estimation, by any means a weak man.

Devoe was coming back up the stairs. He was talking loudly now: "—waving his gun like a crazy man. I think Jean must've gone crazy. He was goin' to kill us all. If it hadn't been for Harry—"

"Yes," said Sheriff Trimble. "I understand."

The two entered the room. The sheriff bobbed his head at Fern.

"Cole's cleared yuh on that killin' out at yore place, Harry," he said to Severn. "Nobody'll bother yuh on that."

"All right."

TRIMBLE glanced down at the covered body of Jean.

"And Cole's told me how this happened. I won't hold yuh, Harry, but

I want yuh to be around for the inquest."

"All right. I'll be there."

There was a pause while Trimble pulled back the lace bedspread, looked at Jean Targen, then covered him again. Into this small pool of silence Cole Devoe splashed three quiet words:

"Minerva is dead." He had spoken to Fern.

"What?" A pallor washed across her features. *"What!"*

"Tell her, Sheriff," said Devoe.

Trimble shook his head mournfully. "It just now happened, just outside of town. A terrible thing, ma'am. We all feel terrible."

"Never mind that," Devoe cut in impatiently. "Tell her."

"Well, we were just outside of town, ma'am, all of us. It was a posse, kind of. We'd had quite a day, and I guess all of us were a little jumpy. Anyway, there was a man comin' down the road toward us and ridin' like blazes. I hollered for him to stop, and he didn't stop. Then Otto Krantz hollered for him to stop or we'd shoot. And he still didn't stop. He just yelled somethin' back at us and took off his hat and batted at his hoss with it. And then I saw it wasn't a man at all. It was Mrs. Devoe."

"She'd do that sometimes," said Devoe coolly. "She'd put on levis and ride like wild through the hills."

"Well, she was shore ridin' wild tonight. And she was shore togged out like a man and had a gun on her hip."

"A gun!" whispered Fern. "She was coming here!"

Devoe inclined his head.

"What'd yuh say, ma'am?"

"Nothin'," said Devoe. "Go on with the story, Sheriff."

"Well, naturally, as soon as I saw who it was, I shouted to the boys to let her go on. But I guess Duffy didn't hear me."

"Duffy?" exclaimed Severn. "Not old Duffy!"

The sheriff nodded. "Yeah, old Duffy. He'd just joined up with us and, as I say, I guess he didn't hear me. Anyway, he pulled out that old hoss pistol of his and shot her dead center. 'Course he feels terrible. Although—" For a moment Trimble seemed to be groping for words. "Although, of course," he finished, "when yuh get as old as Duffy yuh don't show yore feelin's so much. Yuh're in a kind of haze, I reckon."

"Yes," said Devoe. "Poor old Duffy. I know how he must feel. What a tragic accident! My poor, poor Minerva."

Severn stood up. "I'm leavin'," he announced thickly.

He left the house. He got into the saddle and passed slowly along the dark, quiet street. On impulse, he turned down to Main Street and rode by the Blue Bull Saloon. A number of horses, belonging, he guessed, to the posse, were tied at the hitchrack there.

He rode more slowly as he came opposite Teller's house. He saw a light in the kitchen. Peg Teller spoke from the porch shadows.

"All right. I'm still up, pardner. I thought you'd be dragging along."

He dismounted and joined her on the porch. "Are yuh up on the latest news yet?" he asked.

"Some of it. Sam was over to tell me. I know about Cole's wife. And I heard that—"

"My poor, poor Minerva."

"What?"

"Nothin'. Just gettin' a bad taste out of my mouth."

"Yeah? Well, there're all sorts of stories about you. Are you in the clear, pardner?"

"In the clear all around."

"That's good. Coffee?"

"Yes, lady!"

Severn followed Peg through the house and into the kitchen. He sat at the table, skimmed his hat against the wall and stretched out his legs. He was tired, he suddenly realized—dog tired! The stoked-up fire crackled in the stove. The lamp cast a steady, cozy glow across the room. Peg's starched dress swished as she moved briskly about. She put beans in the coffee grinder and began grinding.

SEVERN watched her with lazy appreciation, the dark sheen of her hair, the energetic swing of her shoulders—a small girl with a large fund of good, solid horse sense. A girl who was dying of curiosity, yet knew enough not to pester a man with questions when he didn't feel like talking.

"I'll tell you all about it after I get some coffee in my system," he said.

"No hurry."

"I'll tell yuh this much now. I just kicked away my last chance for a buck-

ettul of Devoe's money."

"Yeah?" She stopped grinding coffee. "You mean it's thumbs down on Alice?"

"Somethin' like that."

"Why?" Her voice was flat. She turned and stared at him, holding the coffee grinder by its handle.

He grinned at her. "Because," he said, "I've discovered that I want somethin' more than I do money. Mostly, I want you."

"Me?" Her eyes opened wide. "Why, I—I . . . You're crazy!"

"No-o, I don't think so." He shook his head decisively. "Nope. I'm just beginnin' to get smart. From now on I'm givin' Bob Devoe a little competition. How yuh like that idea?"

Her eyes squinted and her lip started to tremble.

"Hey!" he cried in alarm. "There's nothin' to bawl about."

"I'm not bawling!" she retorted fiercely. "It's just that I . . . Oh! Oh!"

She burst into sobs and dropped the coffee grinder. She rushed at Severn and threw her arms around his neck.

"Hey!" he protested. "Yuh're sputterin' in my ear."

"I'm not! I'm laughing! I'm . . . Oh! Oh!"

He held her tight. He held her so tight that she was laughing and crying and gasping for breath all at the same time. It was a wonder she didn't strangle.

●

THE STORY OF CRIPPLE CREEK

RANCHERS who found their land overrun by miners and spent blood and money vainly trying to drive them off, could have learned a thing or two from a Denver man named Bennett, who, with one stroke of genius, founded the thriving mine town of Cripple Creek.

The story began in 1884 when a prospector named Chicken Bill reported gold on Mount Pisgah, near Pike's Peak, in Colorado. There was an instant rush, but the early miners were disappointed at finding no quartz and when a vial of gold chloride, which had been used to salt worthless mines, was discovered in the property of a local promoter, the whole business blew up. The miners got a rope and started looking for Chicken Bill, but that prudent prospector had departed.

Things languished until 1891 and then a cowhand named Robert Womack found gold at Pisgah. Womack, however, was so unlucky that his friends called him Crazy Bob and his present strike was no exception. When his first diggings assayed out at $140 a ton he went on a grand bender and sobered up days later to find that he had sold out for $500.

Ten months later there were hundreds of miners camping out in October's early cold on the sides of the mountain. This land belonged to a ranch owned by a Denver real estate firm named Bennett and Myers. When the foreman of the ranch, George Carr, found it being filled up with miners who were digging holes all over the mountain, he naturally took umbrage. But before taking up the six-shooter, he telegraphed his employers, describing the situation.

"These doggone miners," he complained, "are not only boogering the cattle, but digging holes for them to fall into and probably slow-elking plenty for eating beef. Should I chouse 'em clear outa the state?"

Bennett and Myers sent young Bennett down to investigate. The owner looked the situation over and restrained Carr, who was chafing at the bit and sniffing gunpowder smoke. Bennett didn't want a lot of shooting and maybe a killing or two. Besides, being a real estate man, a perfectly good solution came to him.

"It'll be tough to drive these miners out," he said. "Let's organize a town here and sell them lots."

A town was laid out and Bennett sold four hundred lots as fast as he could rake in the money. Thus he not only avoided bloodshed, but also made a nice profit!

Bennett and Myers tried to name the new town Fremont, but Cripple Creek had been its name and Cripple Creek stuck.

The Cripple Creek workings became fabulous and poured out a flood of gold which made Bennett's original transaction look ridiculous. But there is small chance he could have driven the gold-hungry miners off anyway. Neither the Indians nor the U.S. Army was ever able to do that!

—*Sam Brant*

SILVER LINING, and no mistake

It's a fine day for ducks, but the deputy of Coyote County almost sings a swan song when he goes out a-hunting for some home brew!

Boo Boo gulps, and Million crawls out from the weeds and glares at us.

A Boo Boo Bounce story

by BEN FRANK

IT IS Friday morning no little early, with the grass and such looking somewhat frostbit, when I put on my pants and feel a sinking sensation in my stomach, for there is no happy sound of two silver dollars jingling. Even before I put my hand into my pocket, I know my dear wife has found said ringers, and I will not never see same again.

I set down to breakfast, and say, "My dear, it is not hardly possible for a man to do any duck huntin' with but two shotgun shells to his name. Should I have even so much as one dollar to spend for—"

The look she gives me makes me swallow wrong and choke. But I am desperate, for only yesterday "Chin-nick" Chancy's Cousin Wilbur left his bird

dog, Million—so called because Wilbur says he will not take a million dollars for him—with Chin-nick to keep a few days, and Chin-nick has asked me to go duck hunting with him this day.

"My dear," I say, "it is bad business for I, the deputy sheriff of Coyote county, U.S.A., to be so low on ammunition. Should a desperado come to Polecat and—"

"Hopewell," she says icy, "should that happen, you would be safer without no ammunition!"

I see for sure there is no getting back even one smackeroo to buy shells with, so I say no more, but finish eating and put on my hat. Outside, it is indeed a very fine day for ducks, and then some, and a great sadness assails me as I wander along the street of Polecat, thinking what a bad beginning this Friday has got. If I could of knowed how much worse it would get before sundown, I would of wisht utmostly I was a thousand miles elsewhere. But ignorance is bliss, and no mistake.

I come to "Jigger Joe's" Emporium, and there is Jigger Joe himself, leaning against a batwing, looking very content.

"Hopewell," he says, "guess what."

BEING in no mood to guess nothing, I shake my head.

"No-work Norton has give me two of the biggest catfish yuh ever seen. Come Sunday, I am goin' to have a real fish feed, and no mistake, which there is nothin' I like better."

"That is nice," I say, and amble on, for there is no point in hanging around and about the Emporium being broke as I am. I go past where at they ar' tearing down the old Sweeny building, cross the street and walk into Chin-nick's barber shop

"Chin-nick," I say despondent, "being deputy sheriff, I find it impossible to go duck huntin' as planned previous on account of my various duties keepin' me busy."

"It is just as well, Hopewell," he sighs. "That dog, Million, has et a cake of shavin' soap and is sicker'n a hatful of poisoned goldfish. What are yuh so busy about?"

"Things," I say, and hurry on before he can ask any more questions, for a man does not like it nosed around and about that his wife has took his last two smackeroos from his pocket while he is sleeping sound.

When I step into the jail office, "Boo Boo" Bounce is standing up. I know instantaneous that he, the sheriff of Coyote County, has a great worry on his mind. Otherwise, he would be setting in his easy chair, him being very heavy and not prone to standing.

"Hopewell," he says, "I am glad yuh have come hither before goin' duck huntin'."

"Unless yuh will make me a advance on my salary," I murmur, "I will be unable to go."

"Leave us not talk of the inconsequential," he interrupts. "Deputy, it is no secret amongst the voters that I am strictly a dry sheriff."

"True," I say. "Yuh're practically as dry as Skunk Creek in the summer."

"Also"—he points a fat finger at me—"I see to it that others are as dry as the law and common sense demand. I am a stickler on that point. I wish to add, Hopewell, that I, a dry sheriff, am proud to have yuh for my deputy since you, too, are more or less dry. You and me are the setters of a very fine example to the citizens, and no mistake!"

"Yes, indeed!" I say utmost hearty.

Boo Boo sets down and sighs. "Hopewell, in spite of my dryness, I find I must indulge in a nip this afternoon."

"No!" I say, no little astounded.

"It is like this, Deputy. As yuh know, they are tearin' down the old Sweeny building. Yesterday even', the workmen opened the corner stone. Sealed up in it was a tin box. They took the box to Bing-bong Beemer's blacksmith for him to open. Guess what?"

I shake my head.

"In the box was a bottle of very fine liquor and a letter. This letter was writ by ole man Sweeny hisself, and it says he wants all us city and county officials to drink a toast to him when the corner stone is opened up. Now, ole man Sweeny, although dead nigh onto twenty years, is not to be ignored, him being a prominent citizen as of previous. Also, betwixt you and me, whisky of that age should ought to be mighty well-seasoned and tasty, and no mistake."

Boo Boo strokes his three chins thoughtful. "Hopewell, it is a known fact that few people appreciate the finer things of life. For that reason, it seems a shame to waste Sweeny's well-sea-

soned nectar on such as Mayor Mincemeat Malone and Judge Jackson and the rest."

"True," I agree. "Two such gents as you and I would appreciate it."

"Exactly, Hopewell. Especially me." He takes a five-dollar bill from a pocket careful like. "Bing-bong Beemer has just brung said bottle of choice liquid to my office, where at we plan to drink a toast to brother Sweeny, no matter where he is. Should I substitute a quart of the more common variety of forty-rod for this fifty-year-old nectar, I doubt if anybody would know the difference. Thusly I would have the latter for future use, such as bad colds and snake bite."

"But," I gasp, "does that not smack of dishonesty?"

He ignores this. "Howsomever, it is necessary for me to procure a quart of the common variety for substitution. That is where you come in, Deputy."

"Oh, no!" I say hasty. "My wife may not object to a occasional beer on my part. But should I go to Jigger Joe's and buy a quart, and should she learn about—"

BOO BOO smiles fatherly and lifts a finger for silence.

"Deputy, I have thunk out everything to the smallest detail. Yuh are to ride to Pop Pulley's for a quart of his moonshine. Pop is not one to talk about to who he sells his brew. Also, for yore trouble yuh can keep the change from this fiver."

I realize this is both a quick and safe way to pick up a few odd dollars, for Pop has been known to even give away his liquor at times, besides selling it cheap. Also, it is Boo Boo, not I, who is being somewhat dishonest.

I reach for the five and wink. Boo Boo winks back very happy, and I think how nice indeed it is to work for such as he, who besides being a fine gentleman in many ways, is no little smart.

"Hurry," he says, "for we drink the toast at three P.M."

I rush out to the stable behind the jail and saddle my paint. Just as I start to mount, who should come along but old Judge Jackson himself, smiling no little chipper and twisting his natty white mustache.

"Hopewell," he purrs, "I am lookin' for a man who I can trust who would like to pick up a little easy money."

"Judge," I say quick, "I am your man, and no mistake!"

"Good! No doubt yuh have heard about what was in the corner stone of the old Sweeny building?"

I nod, feeling somewhat chill about the spine.

He winks crafty. "If I had a quart of forty-rod, I would play a little joke on some friends. Besides, I would save some very fine liquor from bein' wasted. Do yuh understand?"

I understand. Also, I know it is time I am hurrying elsewhere before I become mixed up in something no little unethical.

I put a toe into a stirrup, and say, "Good-by, Judge. Some other time when I ain't quite so busy."

"Leave us not rush away!" he says icy. "Leave us remember as a man of political importance, I am not one for a deputy sheriff to high-hat!"

I do not climb into the saddle. Also, I feel weak.

The judge pulls a five-dollar bill from his vest pocket and tucks it into my hand.

"Hopewell, bring me a quart of red-eye. Anykind will do. I'd buy it myself, but people're likely to get the wrong impression. You keep the change, and never let it be said yuh do not appreciate the fine support I give yuh in political circles. Also, keep yore mouth shut."

With that, he turns and stalks away, and I realize I am indeed in a very bad fix, and no mistake, and I can think of no worse day in my life than this Friday is turning out to be.

No sooner do I ride down the street than who should put his bony head out a window of his office but Mayor "Mincemeat" Malone, and say, "Hopewell, come hither."

I ride up to the window, and he whispers, "Hopewell, this proposition I have is no little confidential."

"Mayor," I declare sincere, "I am utmostly close-mouthed."

"I know it, Hopewell." He smiles. "For that reason, I am askin' yuh to pick me up a quart of snakebite on the sly. Betwixt you and me, deputy, there is danger of some very fine thoughtfulness bein' wasted on a bunch of—"

"Sweeny's thoughtfulness?" I say faint.

"Yuh are a smart man, Hopewell." He pulls a five-spot from a pocket and puts it into my hand. "I do not intend that Sweeny's thoughtfulness should be wasted on such as Boo Boo Bounce and Judge Jackson and the other hanger-ons. I will substitute—"

"Mayor," I mumble, "I do not care to be a party to this."

He scowls severe. "Have yuh forgot that it is I who has allus saw to it that yuh are not in the cold politically How would yuh like me to throw my influence against yuh? How would yuh like to punch cows in the winter for a livin'?"

THE next thing I know, he has shut the window with a noisy bang, and I am staring at my white face reflected in the glass and thinking how indeed the day has gone from bad to worse. But I can think of nothing to do but buy three quarts of homemade brew off "Pop" Pulley and give one each to Boo Boo, Judge Jackson and Mayor Mincemeat Malone, come what may.

Then it occurs to me I will be no little conspicuous, riding my paint with three quart bottles of moonshine in my arms. So I ride home to get my hunting coat, it being several sizes too large for me besides having numerous pockets, inside and out, which a man can stow fat ducks in. Or quarts. Since it would look no little peculiar for a man to wear a hunting coat without carrying a gun, I also decide to get my shotgun, even if I have only two shells, one in each barrel.

I slip into the house and tiptoe into the kitchen where at I keep both coat and gun behind the pantry door. I have both arms in my coat when my elbow knocks the coffee pot off the shelf.

"What's going on in there?" my wife bellows from afar.

The first thing I think of is the three fives in my pocket, and I look about for a safe place to hide same. There is my double-barrel scattergun staring at me. I stuff the three fives deep into a barrel and cradle the gun under my arm. At that moment, my wife steps into the kitchen.

"Hopewell," she says, "have you dug up some money I do not know about to buy shells? Stand still while I search you."

"My dear," I say, hurt, "I am bein' sent on official business, and a deputy cannot wander around and about the countryside with no weapon handy."

"A likely story," she says, running her hands in and out of my pockets.

She finds nothing but a few-odd nails, my buckeye and a pocket-knife.

"The next time I see Boo Boo, I will check up on this official business," she says, and picks up the coffee pot.

I hurry to my paint and ride away. As for the three fives, I can think of no safer place for them than in the barrel of my gun, so I do not remove same.

The sun is shining no little bright now, turn the frost to drops of glittering dew, and I find myself inclined to whistle, which I am doing somewhat trilly as I ride up to "Pop" Pulley's place.

Pop is a old bachelor who lives on the bank of Skunk Creek. Besides trapping for a living, he raises a patch of corn for his still and is deafer than a dead mule.

I slide from my paint and head toward the barn where at I hear Pop cussing no little fierce. I step inside, and there he is, a club in his hands, staring at a hole under the manger.

"What's the matter, Pop?" I yell.

He looks up and blinks no little surprised from amongst his whiskers.

"No, I ain't gettin' no fatter," he says, and lets fly a stream of tobacco juice into the hole. "Fact is, I'm losin' weight, tryin' to ketch up with these blasted rats. Ever since I lost my bottle of rat poison, they've been . . . Oh, oh!"

A big rat has poked his head out of another hole.

"Shoot'm, Deputy!" Pop roars. "Shoot the varmint!" Only he does not say "varmint."

I lift my gun and take aim. Suddenly I remember the three fives, but cannot remember which barrel I put same in. While I am trying to remember, the rat disappears.

"Dag-nabbit!" Pop yells, only he does not say "dag-nabbit," "why didn't yuh shoot? That was the grandpappy of them rats!"

"Got only two shells," I shout.

"Looky," Pop bristles, "even if yuh are a deputy, yuh can't tell me where to go to . . . Say, what'd yuh come here for?"

I get within a inch of his best ear, and yell, "Come to get three quarts of your homebrew, Pop."

"Three? Good gravy! Gettin' it for yoreself?"

"No, I ain't."

"Paint? What're yuh goin' to paint? The jail? Shore needs it."

"Just give me three quarts, and do not worry about it."

"In a hurry, huh? I got it in a keg at the house."

He hobbles toward his two-room shack, him living in one room and his still being in the other, with me tagging close behind.

WHEN we get inside, he lets fly at the ash box, and says, "Hopewell, this batch didn't do right. Ain't got the right smell."

"Leave us not wórry about the smell," I say loud.

"Hopewell," he scowls, "if yuh was not a good friend of mine, I would punch yuh in the nose. I do not like to get told to go to . . . Incidental, I ain't never got up the courage to taste this new batch, so I can't guarantee a thing. But I reckon it'll make a right fair paint thinner."

I say nothing to this, for I am about wore out, yelling my head off.

"Bring anything to get it in?" he asks.

I shake my head, which he can understand.

"Ain't got a bottle on the place," he says. "Reckon yu'll have to take it in this ole molasses bucket."

He picks up a gallon tin pail with a lid and goes into the back room. I follow. He dips the pail into the keg and brings it out brimful and slaps the lid on it tight.

"There yuh are, Hopewell."

"How much do I owe you?" I ask.

"Pee-you is right." He grins. "Smells somethin' fierce."

"How much money for this?" I bellow.

"Money? Glad to give it to yuh, Hopewell. Was goin' to throw it out nohow. Figgered I'd cook me up a fresh batch."

This is indeed no little generous of Pop, and I think how this day has its good points, even if it has been awful up to now, when I have collected fifteen smackeroos in a few hours without scarcely doing no work, which will buy numerous shells.

I thank Pop hearty, which he thinks I am talking about the weather, and ride back to Polecat with the molasses pail somewhat hid under my hunting coat. Arriving in town, I go into the alley back of the Emporium, find three empty quart bottles in the ashcan, fill them with Pop's brew and dump the remainder of said brew in Jigger Joe's rainbarrel, which says on the side, "For Fire Only."

Then I toss the pail into the ashcan. The three quarts I stash in various pockets of my coat.

When I go into the jail office, Boo Boo is setting in his easy chair, taking his afternoon nap, and I remember I have not et. I set a quart on the desk and am about to depart quiet, when Boo Boo opens one eye.

"Hopewell"—he smiles—"I see yuh have done yore duty."

He opens the other eye, reaches into a desk drawer and pulls out two full pints and a dusty looking empty quart.

"I have already emptied Sweeny's nectar, but having no quart container, I have used two pints. Kindly fill this ancient bottle with Pop's beverage, Deputy."

This I do with utmost care, and Boo Boo replaces the cap on the Sweeney bottle.

"Deputy" — he frowns — "I do not wish to have these two pints around and about the office, for who knows who might accidentally find same. Where at might I hide them?"

There is a stamping of feet outside the door, and Boo Boo's fat face loses some color.

"Deputy, do somethin' quick!" he pants.

I grab up the empty quart and stuff it in a pocket of my coat. Then I take the two pints and put one in each hip pocket. Boo Boo looks grateful as there comes a firm knock on the door.

"Come in," he calls, hearty.

The door opens brisk, and in walks Judge Jackson with a very pleasant smile beneath his white mustache.

"Greetin's, gents," he says. "Ah, Hopewell, I thought I saw yuh ride up just now. Could that be Mr. Sweeny's toast in yon musty bottle?"

"It is, and no mistake," Boo Boo answers innocent.

"Good!" the judge says, picking the bottle up and tucking it under his coat. "I have been thinkin' as how we should ought to drink the toast in my office since it is some roomier than yore'n, Boo Boo."

"Why, shore," Boo Boo agrees immediate. "I do not care to have my office used for such a purpose as drinkin' hard liquor on account of I am strictly dry."

"True, Boo Boo." The judge smiles dapper at me. "Come, Deputy, leave us walk along the street together, if you are goin' my way?"

"I am about to go home to eat dinner," I say faint.

THE judge and I walk out into the sunshine.

"Hopewell," he hisses, "did yuh get it?"

I nod feeble.

"Good!" he says. "Come with me to my office."

In his office, he sets the Sweeny bottle on his desk and frowns sudden.

"Hopewell, I plumb forgot to get a empty container."

I pull out the empty bottle from my coat and hand it to him.

"Hopewell," he says, "without exaggeration, yuh are the most thoughtful gentleman in Coyote County."

Him being somewhat shaky on account of his age, I proceed to pour the liquid from the Sweeny bottle into the empty. He is no little pleased that I do not spill one single drop. Likewise I fill the Sweeny bottle with another quart of Pop's snake-bite cure.

The judge frowns slight. "Incidental, Hopewell, there ain't no place hereabouts where at I can hide this quart that my secretary will not likely run acrost it. Kindly put it back into yore coat pocket and keep it for me until further notice. I know I can trust yuh, Hopewell."

I do as he says, putting the empty and the full into my coat pockets.

He squints at the Sweeny bottle happy and twirls his mustache.

"Now that fifty-odd-year-ole stuff will not be wasted. It will be drunk by a man who appreciates good likker."

There is a loud banging on the door, and before he can say one more word, who should walk in but Mayor Mince-meat Malone.

"Good afternoon, gents," he says, rubbing his thin hands together no little energetic. "I saw you ride along the street, Hopewell, and figgured yuh'd be at the jail. Howsomever, Boo Boo tol' me yuh had gone home to dinner. Also, he mentioned that the judge has brought Sweeny's thoughtfulness over here."

"That is right," the judge says.

"Incidental," Mince-meat goes on, "I been thinkin' that on account of the Sweeny buildin' havin' been a part of the fair city of Polecat and me bein' the mayor, it would be more apropos should we drink the toast in my office."

The judge smiles no little agreeable and nods.

"That is a wise thought, Mayor."

"Exactly," Mince-meat says, picking up the bottle and hiding it under his coat. "Hopewell, since yuh are on yore way to dinner, I will walk down the street with yuh."

I glance at the judge, and he gives me a crafty wink. I am in no winking mood, for I realize I am setting, so to speak, on a keg of powder with a very short fuse burning.

Outside, I stop to wipe the cold sweat off my face, and Mince-meat whispers, "Did you get a quart of substitution?"

"Yes." I nod.

"Hopewell, I don't know a finer man than you, and any time yuh want any political support, just say the word. Come."

We go into his office, and he sets the Sweeny on his desk.

"Leave us have the low-grade quart." He smiles.

By now I have no idea which quart is which, but it makes no difference, for they are all the same. I pull out a full bottle and a empty and set them on the desk.

"Hopewell"—he beams—"yuh think of ever'thing. Yuh even brought a empty for to hold Sweeny's thoughtfulness. A man of yore caliber should ought to run for Congress."

The mayor had a steady hand, and he does the pouring out and in without spilling a drop.

"There," he sighs content. "Betwixt you and me, friend Hopewell, a quart of very fine liquid refreshment is saved from a untimely demise. However, I do not care to have the evidence of my deception setting around and about my office. If it ain't too much trouble, would yuh mind—"

There is no reason why I should not return the bottles to my pockets, for by now I am in so deep I can never get no deeper, not even should I rob a bank. With shaking hands, I pick up the emp-

ty and the full and return same to my pockets.

"Hopewell," he says, "yuh look somewhat pale."

"I ain't et my dinner yet," I murmur.

"That is too bad, Hopewell. Incidental, may I remind yuh that I trust yuh implicitly, but should a few drops of Sweeny's thoughtfulness disappear from said bottle while in yore possession, I will be utmostly displeased, and no mistake!"

"Never fear, Mayor."

NOW there is the sound of many booted feet drawing nigh to his office door. He looks at his watch and smiles chipper.

"Hopewell, it is now three P.M. on the nose. The officials are comin' to drink the toast. Stick around, and I will see to it that you have yore fair share."

"My wife," I begin, "will smell it on my breath, and—"

The door opens, letting in Boo Boo, Judge Jackson, "Small-change" Chase, who is county treasurer, and various other officials. This would seem indeed a good time for me to go home to dinner, but a weakness has settled in my knees, and I have to lean on my shotgun to keep from toppling over. Everybody rushes to the desk on which Sweeny stands, and I see that each and all has a glass in his hand.

"Gents," the judge says, "to the great man himself!"

He reaches for the Sweeny bottle, and no little sudden I have a idea which I think will postpone catastrophe for a short while, giving me a chance to be elsewhere before the lightning strikes.

"Gents," I say hasty, "leave us not rush into this toastin' business without a second thought."

"Such as?" Boo Boo scowls.

"Such as public opinion," I say. "It is bound to get around that the mayor's office was used for the drinking of hard liquor, and the dry element in town will raise no ittle row, and no mistake. Come next election, and yuh'll see."

Mince-meat Malone turns somewhat pale.

"Leave us go back to the judge's office," he says quick.

Judge Jackson clears his throat noisy. "Gents, may I suggest that we drink the toast in the jail office."

Boo Boo blinks rapid and swallows audible. "Why, I don't think that would be so good, me bein' a secter of a fine example."

"I know," Mince-meat says sudden. "Leave us go over to Hopewell's place to drink the toast."

I sway faint against the wall. "Gents, my wife—"

"I got it," says Small-change Chase. "Why not go to Bing-bong Beemer's blacksmith shop. Bng-bong is not one to give two hoots what any voters think."

"There is a slight objection to that," Mince-meat frowns. "Bing-bong will expect a small shot himself."

"True," I say quick, for I have hopes of escaping, once we are in the open, "but leave us not forget that it was Bing-bong who opened the tin box. It would seem only just that he should ought to be cut in on toastin' old man Sweeny."

"Hopewel. is right," Judge Jackson says. "Besides, that would leave our official offices with a clean nose."

"Hopewell" — Boo Boo smiles — "I wish to say I am utmostly proud of yuh. When it comes to thinkin', yuh are the one who can do it."

"Hopewell," Mince-meat booms, "slip Sweeny's thoughtfulness into a pocket and follow us"

"I have not et," I begin.

"Never mind, Deputy," Boo Boo says. "Come!"

I put Sweeny in a empty coat pocket and trail after one and all to Bing-bong Beemer's shop, for there is nothing else I can do, me being the carrier of the toast.

"Bing-bong," the judge says, "we, the leadin' citizens of Coyote County, U.S.A., have come to do yuh a great honor. In appreciation of yore skill in openin' the tin box found ir the Sweeny cornerstone, we have decided to leave yuh also drink a toast to our long diseased friend and fellow citizen."

Bing-bong rubs a grimy hand across his chin, swallows audible and seems to have trouble with his voice.

"Gents," he says at last, "I am no little overwhelmed at this show of gratitude. I—"

"Don't mention it," Mince-meat smiles friendly. "There ain't nobody who realizes yore value to our fair city than us, the choice of the voters. May I add—"

"Leave us dig up a small glass, Bing-bong," Boo Boo interrupts, "for it must be some minutes past three. Also, Deputy, kindly remove Sweeny's nectar from yore pocket."

I pull the bottle from my pocket, but my fingers are all thumbs, and I am lucky to get the bottle set on Bing-bong's anvil without dropping it.

BING-BONG looks first at the bottle and then at the faces around and about his shop.

"Gents," he stammers, "I ain't got no glass. Howsomever, I have a ole tincan some'ers about. But before we drink, I wish to confess—"

At that moment, there comes a scream from outside, followed by numerous other screams and excited voices. I drop my gun and rush for the outdoors along with everybody else. What I see sends a chill over me, and then some.

Running down the street, his mouth dripping foam, his eyes burning like red-hot coals, is Chin-nick Chancy's Cousin Wilbur's bird dog, Million. Running in all directions and climbing trees and hitchracks and screaming "Mad dog!" are numerous citizens of Polecat.

"Sheriff," Mince-meat Malone bleats as he shins up a tree, "do yore duty!"

Boo Boo stands petrified, only his three chins moving in violent quivers. Then suddenly he draws a deep breath, and bellows:

"Never fear, Boo Boo Bounce allus gets his man! Hopewell, bring me yore shotgun!"

I take a look at Million and see he is looking the other way. I slide down from the tree where at I have been up and race for the shop, scoop up my double-barrel and race back to where Boo Boo is still standing. By now, Million has gone around the corner of "Nail-head" Nutter's general store.

"Stand back, everybody!" Boo Boo commands. "This is work for none other than the sheriff of Coyote County hisself! Hopewell, go find and shoot yon mad dog!"

This is indeed the worst day of my life, and no mistake, and I wisht I had been born in Africa and was still there, for there is nothing more dangerous than a mad mad dog on the loose.

"Boo Boo," I say faint, "leave us not forget I am married."

"Sheriff," Judge Jackson roars from where he is trying to balance himself on the top rail of a hitchrack, "don't stand there like a ninny! Do somethin'!"

Boo Boo gulps a deep breath. "Come, Deputy," he says weak.

Together we edge around the corner of the store. At that precise moment, Million crawls out from a clump of weeds, shakes some of the foam off his jaws and glares at us.

"Shoot to kill!" Boo Boo hisses.

I pull back both hammers and take aim. And then I remember something. The three fives are still in the barrel o' my gun! While I am trying to remember which barrel said fives are in, Million turns himself about and crawls under the back porch of Nail-head's store out of sight.

"Hopewell," Boo Boo roars, "what is the matter with you? Leave somebody have that gun who is quick on the trigger!"

He grabs the gun and pulls. I also pull, but my fingers slip from the barrel, and I stumble and set down on the ground with a no little thump. There is a muffled crash of glass, and I have the sudden feeling of cold dampness around and about the back of my lap. I glance up and see Boo Boo staring at me. He has forgot all about the shotgun and Million.

"Hopewell," he says hoarse, "stand up."

I stand up and have the sensation of liquid running down each leg, and in my hip pockets is the grating of broken glass.

Boo Boo casts the shotgun aside and clamps fat fingers on my shoulders.

"Sweeny's nectar!" he gurgles, and begins to shake me utmostly violent.

"Boo Boo, be careful!" I cry desperate.

But it is too late. Already the two full quarts and the one empty is shook from the pockets of my hunting coat, and before I can get loose from Boo Boo, they have hit the hard ground with no little sickening crash of much broken glass.

Boo Boo stops shaking me and stares at the ground. By now, there are numerous other hombres staring also, including Judge Jackson and Mayor Mince-meat Malone, all of which have come somewhat cautious around the store building to see what is going on. As for

me, I think there is nothing in the wide world worse than this that can happen to me on this bad day. Little do I know.

THERE is a thousand years or so of silence in which nobody says anything, and I can think of nothing better to do than pick up my shotgun. I am no little nervous and shaky and forget the hammers are cocked. There is a sudden great roar, and the gun almost jumps from my hands. I glance down and see that both hammers are laying tight against the firing pins. The worst has happened. My three fivers are no more.

At that moment, there is a great commotion, for Million is crawling out from under the porch and shiftin' for game. Then Chin-nick Chancy comes running down the alley, tearing his hair and screaming like crazy.

"Hopewell, yuh idiot!" he yells. "There's nothin' wrong with Million except he et another bar of shavin' soap and has soapsuds all over his mouth. If Cousin Wilbur learns yuh have shot Million, he will raise ructions!"

He sees that Million is not shot and stops his yelling.

Bing-bong Beemer steps up with a peculiar expression on his sooty face.

"Gents," he says, "since there ain't no mad dog to kill, leave us remember that three o'clock has come and went, an' as yet we ain't drunk a toast to ole man Sweeny."

"Come one and all," Short-change Chase says.

"Excuse me," I say, "but I ain't et my dinner and now I will be moving homeward, for my wife is waiting."

Boo Boo shakes a fat finger at me. "Not so fast, Deputy. I have a little matter of business to take up with yuh presently."

"Me, also," Judge Jackson says chilly.

"Come to think of it," Mince-meat Malone growls, "I, too, wish to talk with yuh privately, Hopewell."

I know I am in for it, and no mistake, for the three of them will want their five-spots back, and at the moment I can think of no worse place in the wide world to hide three five-dollar bills than the barrel of a shotgun.

Bing-bong leads the way. The judge and the mayor fall in step on each side of me, and Boo Boo brings up the rear. Small-change Chase and the others trail behind.

We go into the shop, and Bing-bong clears his throat husky.

"Gents, yore kindness in askin' me to drink a toast with yuh is no little touchin'. So I have a confession to make. When I opened that tin box I—I emptied the bottle an' filled it with some cold tea I allus keep handy to drink."

"Bing-bong Beemer," Judge Jackson says frigid, "that is about the lowest-down trick I ever heard tell of."

"Wait, Judge," Bing-bong says humble. "Whilst you gents was out after the dog, I emptied the bottle and refilled it with the original fluid. I wasn't goin' to say nothin' about it, but I reckon I would not of slept good tonight if I hadn't."

"Bing-bong" — the judge smiles — "yuh are a gentleman of the ole school. Men, get out yore glasses."

A shadow darkens the doorway, and who should come in but Jigger Joe Jirous. His face is red, and there is a great wrath blazing in his eyes. In his hand, he is carrying Pop Pulley's molasses pail.

"Boo Boo," he roars, "I demand yuh do yore duty. Somebody has got to be hung. I put my two fine catfish in the fire-barrel back of the Emporium an' somebody poisoned 'em dead!" He holds up Pop's pail with a shaking hand. "The killer brought the poison in this. I know, 'cause this bucket smells the same as the water in the barrel!"

"What is all the rumpus about?" a voice asks, and there is Pop Pulley standing in the door, blinking around and about. Then he sees the molasses pail in Jigger Joe's hand, spits gushy and grins amongst his whiskers.

"Yuh boys a-fussin' over that ole bucket I give Hopewell this mornin'? Got some more of 'em at home if yuh want 'em."

Jigger Joe turns his burning eyes on me, and I know that the bad part of this day is not even yet begun.

"Hopewell!" he gurgles. "So that was why yuh snook back of my place a while ago! Yuh low-down big catfish poisoner, I'll fix yuh."

He swings the pail. I do not duck in time, and the pail bangs me on top of the head no little painful, and I set down hard. I look up, expecting to see Jigger Joe coming at me, but he is walking out the door, looking like he has lost all his relatives.

POP PULLEY lets out a squawk. He has saw the glasses in everybody's hands and the bottle on the anvil.

"Good gravy!" he says, only it is not "good gravy," but something much stronger. "Don't touch that stuff!"

And before anyone can stop him, he grabs Sweeny's bottle of fifty-odd-year-old nectar by the neck and busts it over the anvil.

"Hopewell," he says, "if you ain't used the rest of that gallon for paint thinner, yuh better throw it away. When I cleaned out my still, I found what was wrong with this batch. My bottle of rat poison got knocked off a shelf and fell into the cooker. Well, got to be goin'. Want to see that big catfish Jigger Joe was braggin' about 'fore he swatted yuh with that pail."

Pop walks out, leaving a no little noisy silence behind and four very white faces belonging to Boo Boo, the judge, Mince-meat Malone and myself.

At last "Bing-bong" Beemer sighs sad and says, "Gents, it seems as how a toast to ole man Sweeny should ought to be drunk regardless of Pop misunderstanding what was in the bottle. I still have a quart of cold tea on hand."

The judge shudders, and Mince-meat Malone swears. It is Boo Boo who sighs deep, and murmurs, "Hopewell, pour the tea."

I pour the tea.

Later, in the jail office, Boo Boo is still somewhat pale.

"Deputy," he says, "I cannot help but think how close I come to bein' a party to the death of some more or less very fine citizens. I do not care to have same ever find out how I switched contents of bottles. Here"—and he hands me a much folded five-dollar bill—"take this and leave us forget forever what has happened this day."

On the way home, as I cross the courthause lawn, Judge Jackson stops me. He, too, is no little pale.

"Hopewell," he says, "here is five dollars. It is a symbol of the great faith I have in you to keep yore mouth shut about the little joke I intended to play on the boys."

No little astounded, I take the five and fold it with the one Boo Boo has give me. Before I get home, I am stopped again. This time by Mayor Mince-meat Malone.

"Hopewell," he says, "never, never open yore big mouth about us puttin' Pop's poison in that bottle. Incidental, here is five dollars to bind our friendship."

As I put this five with the other two, I cannot hardly believe for this day to turn out so lovely after all considering the bad start it has had up to now.

And then I step into the house, and my wife says, "Hopewell, you are wet from the waist down. Do you want to catch your death of cold? Skin out of them pants and put on a dry pair."

The next thing I know, she has my tea-soaked pants over her arm and is walking into the kitchen.

Then I hear her let out a little gurgle of happiness.

"Hopewell," she cries, "guess what I found? Three five-dollar bills tucked in your watch pocket! Lucky I found 'em before they got spent for shotgun shells."

This is the last straw. My gun slides from my fingers, and I drop down on a chair and do not care if I am alive or dead.

Then my wife says from the kitchen, "Speaking of shotgun shells, I took one out of your gun early this morning to loan to Soup Shannon to shoot a skunk what got into his chicken house. He ain't returned it yet, and likely won't."

That is when something clicks in my mind, and I remember I put the three fives into the right barrel.

"My dear," I say hopeful, "from which barrel did you remove said shell?"

"From the right one," she answers.

Gently I lift my gun from the floor and set it in a corner, thusly leaving the three fives in the right barrel safe and sound, for I can think of no better place for them to be at the present. Also, I am thinking that even on the worst of days, there is always a silver lining, and no mistake!

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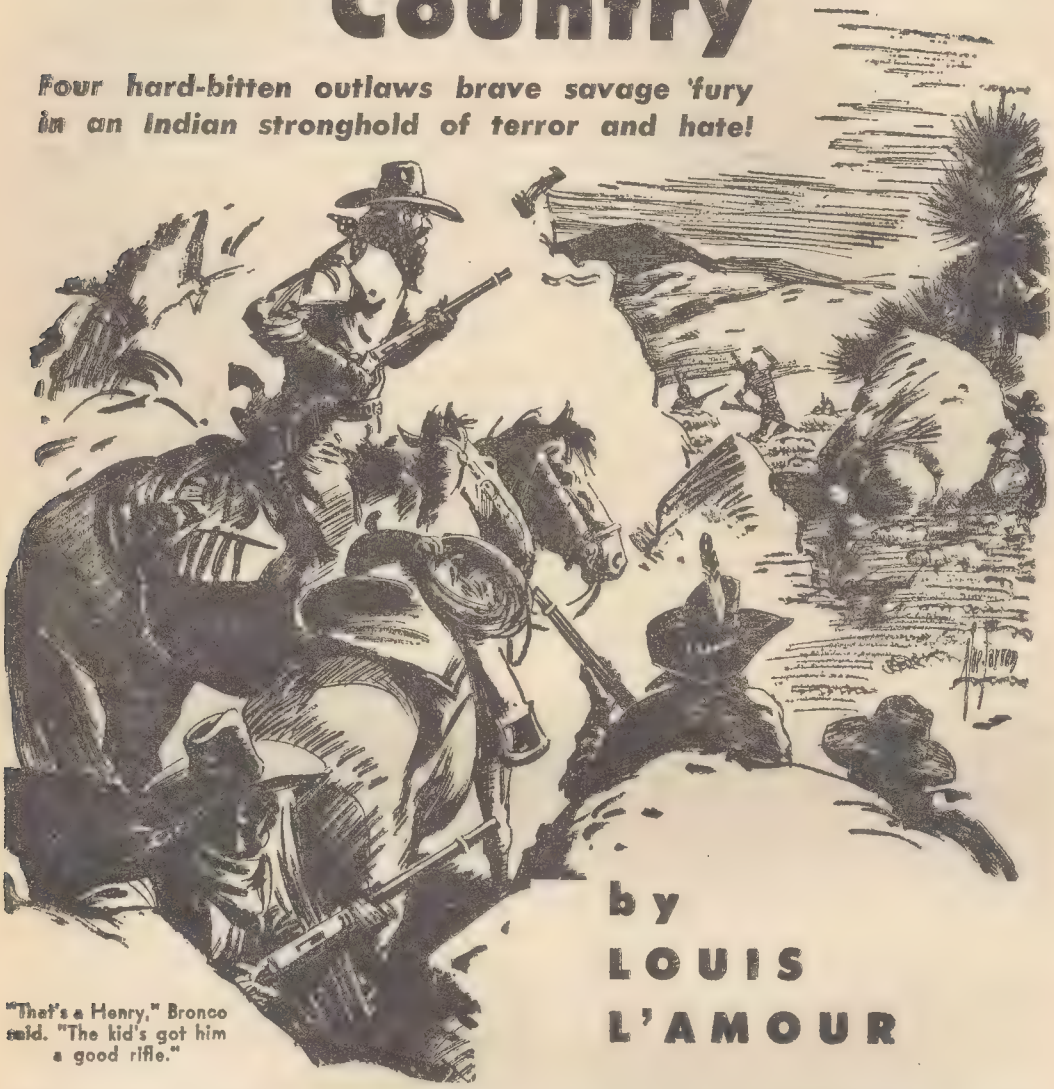
Another Boo Boo Bounce Story Next Issue

PHILOSOPHER, AND NO MISTAKE, by BEN FRANK

In VICTORIO'S Country

Four hard-bitten outlaws brave savage fury in an Indian stronghold of terror and hate!



"That's a Henry," Bronco said. "The kid's got him a good rifle."

by LOUIS L'AMOUR

THE four riders, hard-bitten men bred to the desert and the gun, pushed steadily southward. "Red" Clanahan, a monstrous big man with a wide-jawed bulldog face and a thick neck descending into massive shoulders, held the lead. Behind him, usually in single file but occasionally bunching, trailed the others.

It was hot and still. The desert of southern Arizona's Apache country was rarely pleasant in the summer, and this day was no exception. "Bronco" Smith who trailed just behind "Red," mopped his lean face with a handkerchief and cursed fluently, if monotonously.

He had his nickname from the original meaning of the term, "wild and unruly" and the Smith was a mere convenience, in respect to the custom that insists a man have two names. The "Dutchman" defied the rule by having

none at all, or if he had once owned a name it was probably recorded only upon some forgotten reward poster lining the bottom of some remote sheriff's desk drawer. To the southwestern desert country he was simply and sufficiently, the Dutchman.

As for "Yaqui Joe," he was called just that, or was referred to as the "breed" and everyone knew without question who was indicated. He was a wide-faced man with a square jaw, stolid and silent, a man of varied frontier skills, but destined to follow always where another led. A man who had known much hardship and no kindness, but whose commanding virtue was loyalty.

Smith was a lean whip of a man with slightly graying hair, stooped shoulders and spidery legs. Dried and parched by desert winds, he was as tough as cowhide and iron. It was said that he had shot his way out of more places than most men had ever walked into, and he would have followed no man's leadership but that of Big Red Clanahan.

The Dutchman was a distinct contrast to the lean frame of Smith, for he was fat, and not in the stomach alone, but all over his square, thick-boned body. Yet the blue eyes that stared from his round cheeks were sleepy, wise, and wary.

There were those who said that Yaqui Joe's father had been an Irishman, but his name was taken from his mother in the mountains of Sonora. He had been an outlaw by nature and choice from the time he could crawl, and he was minus a finger on his left hand, and had a notch in the top of his ear. The bullet that had so narrowly missed his skull had been fired by a man who never missed again. He was buried in a hasty grave somewhere in the Mogollons.

OF THEM all, Joe was the only one who might have been considered a true outlaw. All had grown up in a land and time when the line was hard to draw.

Big Red had never examined his place in society. He did not look upon himself as a thief nor as a criminal, and would have been indignant to the point of shooting had anybody suggested he was either of these. However, the fact was that Big Red had long since strayed over the border that divides the merely careless from the actually criminal. Like many another Westerner he had branded unbranded cattle on the range, as in the years following the War Between the States the cattle were there for the first comer who possessed a rope and a hot iron.

It was a business that kept him reasonably well supplied with poker and whisky money, but when all available cattle wore brands, it seemed to him the difference in branded and unbranded cattle was largely a matter of time All the cattle had been mavericks after the war, and if a herd wore a brand it simply meant the cattleman had reached them before he did. "Big Red" accepted this as a mere detail, and a situation that could be speedily rectified with a cinch ring, and in this he was not alone.

If the cattleman who preceded him objected with lead, Clanahan accepted this as an occupational hazard.

However, from rustling cattle to taking the money itself was a short step, and halved the time consumed in branding and selling the cattle. Somewhere along this trail Big Red crossed, all unwittingly at the time, the shadow line that divides the merely careless from the actually dishonest, and at about the time he crossed this line, Big Red separated from the man who had ridden beside him for five long, hard frontier years.

The young hardcase who had punched cows and ridden the trail herds to Kansas at his side was equally big and equally Irish, and his name was Bill Gleason.

When Clanahan took to the outlaw trail, Gleason turned to the law. Neither took the direction he followed with any intent. It was simply that Clanahan failed to draw a line that Gleason drew, and that Gleason, being a skillful man on a trail, and a fast hand with a gun, became the sheriff of the country that held his home town of Cholla.

The trail of Big Red swung as wide as his loop, and he covered a lot of country. Being the man he was, he soon won to the top of his profession, if such it might be called. And this brought about a situation.

Cholla had a bank. As there were several big ranchers in the area, and two well-paying gold mines, the bank was solvent, extremely so. It was fairly, rumor said, bulging with gold. This situation naturally attracted attention.

Along the border that divides Mexico from Arizona, New Mexico and Texas was an ambitious and overly bloodthirsty young outlaw known as Ramon Zappe. Cholla and its bank intrigued him, and as his success had been striking and even brilliant, he rode down upon the town of Cholla with confidence and seven riders.

Dismounting in front of the bank, four of the men went inside, one of them being Zappe himself. The other four, with rifles ready, waited for the town to react, but nothing happened. Zappe held this as due to his own reputation, and strutted accordingly.

The bank money was passed over by silent and efficient tellers, the bandits remounted, and in leisurely fashion began to depart. And then something happened that was not included in their plans. It was something that created an impression wherever bad men were wont to gather.

From behind a stone wall on the edge of town came a withering blast of fire, and in the space of no more than fifty yards, five of the bandits died. Two more were hung to a convenient cottonwood on the edge of town. Only one man, mounted upon an exceptionally fast horse, escaped.

Along the dim trails this was put down to chance, but one man dissented, and that man was Big Red Clanahan, for Big Red had not forgotten the hard-bitten young rider who had accompanied him upon so many long trails, and who had stood beside him to cow a Dodge City saloon full of gunfighters. Big Red remembered Bill Gleason, and smiled.

TWICE in succeeding months the same thing happened, and they were attended by only one difference. On those two occasions not one man survived. Cholla was distinctly a place to stay away from.

Big Red was intrigued and tantalized. Although he would have been puzzled by the term, Big Red was in his own way an artist. He was also a tactician, and a man with a sense of humor. He met Yaqui Joe in a little town below the Border, and over frequent glasses of *tequila* he probed the halfbreed's mind, searching for the gimmick that made Cholla foolproof against the outlaw raids.

There had to be something, some signal. If he could learn it, he would find it amusing and a good joke on Bill to drop in, rob Cholla's bank, and get away, thumbing his nose at his old pard.

The time was good. Victorio was on the warpath and had run off horses from the Army, killed some soldiers and fought several pitched battles in which he had come off well, if not always the victor. The country was restless and frightened and pursuit would neither be easily organized nor long continued when every man was afraid to be long away from home.

"Think!" Red struck his hairy fist on the table between them: "Think, Joe! There has to be a signal! Those hombres didn't just pop out of the ground!"

Yaqui Joe shook his head, staring with bleary eyes into his glass. "I remember nothing—nothing. Except—"

His voice trailed off, but Big Red grabbed his shoulder and shook him.

"Except what, Joe? Somethin' that was different! *Think!*"

Yaqui Joe scowled in an effort to round up his thoughts and get a rope on the idea that had come to him. They had been over this so many times before.

"There was nothing!" he insisted. "Only, while we sat in front of the bank, there was a sort of light, like from a glass and the sun. It moved quickly across the street. Like so!" He gestured widely with his hand, knocking his glass to the floor.

Clanahan picked up the glass and filled it once more. He was scowling.

"And that was all? Yuh're shore?"

Waiting until he was sure Gleason was out of town, Big Red rode in. He did not like to do it, but preferred not to trust to anyone else. At the bank he changed some money, glancing casually around. Then his pulse jumped, and he grinned at the teller who handed him his money.

He walked from the bank, stowing away his money. So that was it! And of course, it could be nothing else.

The bank stood in such a position that the windows caught the full glare of the morning light, and that sunlight flowed through the windows and fell full upon the mirror that covered the upper half of the door that led behind the wickets where the money was kept.

If that door was opened suddenly, a flash of light would be thrown into the

windows across the street! A flash that would run along the store fronts the length of the street, throwing the glare into the eyes of the bartender in the saloon, the grocer and the hardware man, and ending upon the faces of the loafers before the livery stable. One at least, and probably more, would see that flash, and the warning would have been given.

He gathered his men carefully, and he knew the men to get for the job. Yaqui Joe, because when sober he was one lump of cold nerve, then "Bronco" Smith and the Dutchman because they were new in the Cholla country, and skillful, able workmen. Then he waited until Victorio was raiding in the vicinity, and sent a startled Mexican into town with news of the Apache.

With Sheriff Bill Gleason in command, over half the able-bodied men rode out of town, and Big Red, with Yaqui Joe at his side, rode in. Bronco Smith and the Dutchman had come in a few minutes earlier, and it was Smith who blocked the opening of the mirrored door.

The job was swift and smooth. The three men in the bank, taken aback by the blocking of their signal, were tied hand and foot and the money loaded into canvas bags. The four were on their way out of town before a sitter before the livery stable recognized the halfbreed.

UNDER a hot, metallic sky the desert lay like a crumpled sheet of dusty copper, scattered with occasional boulders. Here and there it was tufted with cactuses or Joshua palm and slashed by the cancerous scars of dry washes. A lone ranch six miles south of Cholla fell behind them and they pushed on into the afternoon, riding not swiftly but steadily.

Clanahan turned in the saddle and glanced back. His big jaws moved easily over the cud of chewing tobacco, his gray-green eyes squinting against the hard bright glare of the sun.

"Anything in sight?" Bronco did not look around. "Mebbe we'll lose 'em quick."

"Gleason ain't easy lost."

"You got respect for that sheriff."

"I know him."

"Maybe Joe's idea goot one, no?" The Dutchman struck a match with his left hand, cupping it to his cigarette with his palm. "Maybe in Apache country they will not follow?"

"They'll follow. Only in Victorio's country they may not follow far. When we shift hosses we'll be all set."

"How far to the hosses?"

"Only a few miles." Red indicated a saw-toothed ridge on the horizon. "Yonder."

"We got plenty moneys, no?" The Dutchman slapped a thick palm on his saddle-bags and was rewarded with the chink of gold coin. "Och! Mexico City! We go there and I show you how a gentlemans shall live! Mexico City with money to spend! There iss nothing better!"

Two ridges gaped at the sky when they reached the horses, two ridges that lay open like the jaws of a skull. Red Clanahan turned his horse from the dim trail he had followed and dipped down into the gap where lay a wide space of flat ground, partially shaded by two upthrust ledges that held a forty-degree angle above the ground. Four horses waited there, and two pack mules.

Smith nodded, satisfied. "Those mules will take the weight of the gold off our hosses. Grub, too! Yuh think of everything, 'Red!' "

"There's a spring under that corner rock. Better dump yore canteens and refill them. Don't waste any time."

"How about south of here?" Bronco stared off over the desert. "Is there more water?"

"Plenty water." Joe accepted the question. "Latigo Springs tomorrow night, and the day after, Seepin' Springs."

"Good!" Smith bit off a chew of his own. "I was dry as a ten-year-old burro bone when I got here."

He needed nobody to tell him what that bleak waste to the south would be like without water, or how difficult to find water it would be unless you knew where to look.

"How much did we get?" Dutch inquired. "How much? You know, eh?"

"Fifty thousand, or about."

"I'd settle for half!" Smith spat.

"Yuh'll settle for a lot less." Red turned his hard green eyes on Smith. "I'm takin' the top off this one. Took me four weeks of playin' tag with Gleason tc get the layout."

"What do yuh call the top?"

"Seventeen thousand, if she comes to fifty. You get eleven thousand apiece."

Bronco pondered the thought. It was enough. In seven years of outlawry he had never had more than five hundred dollars at one time. Anyway, he wouldn't have stayed that close to Gleason for twice the money. That sheriff had a nose for trouble.

When Big Red first suggested the raid on Cholla, Smith had thought him crazy, but he had to chuckle when he remembered the astonishment on the cashier's face when he stepped around and blocked the door with the mirror before it could be opened, and how "Big Red" had come in through the door on the other side that looked like it wasn't there.

The escape into Victorio's country was pure genius—if they avoided the Apaches. Yaqui Joe's idea had been a good one, but Red had already planned it in advance, as was proved by the waiting horses. Of necessity a pursuing force would have to go slow to avoid the Indians, and they would have no fresh horses awaiting them at the notch.

Under a hot and brassy sky they held steadily southward over a strange, wild land of tawny yellows and reds, bordered by serrated ridges that gnawed at the sky. Clanahan mopped the sweat from his brow and stared back over the trail, lost in dancing heat waves. As usual there was nothing in sight.

HOURS passed, and the only movement aside from the walking of their horses was the wavering heat vibrations and, high under the sun filled dome of the sky, the distant black circling of a buzzard. On the ground not even a horned frog or a Gila monster showed under the withering sun.

"How much farther to water, Joe?"

"One, maybe two mile."

"We'll drink and refill our canteens," Red told them, "but we stop no longer than that. We've got gold enough to do somethin' with and we'd better be gettin' on."

"No sign of 'Paches."

Red shrugged, then spat, wiping the sweat from the inside on his hat band.

"The time to look for Injuns is when there's no sign. Yuh can bet the desert's alive with 'em, but if we're lucky they won't see us."

Latigo Spring was a round pool of milky blue water supplied by a thin trickle from a crack in the sandrock that shaded it. The trickle waged a desperate war with the sun's heat and the thirsty earth. Occasionally, it held its own, but now in the late summer, the water was low.

They swung down and drank, then they held their canteens into the thin flow of the spring. They filled slowly. One by one they sponged out the nostrils and mouths of their horses and led the grateful animals to the water.

Bronco wandered out to where he could look back over their trail. He shaded his eyes against the sun, but then as he started to turn back, he hesitated, staring at the ground.

"Red." His voice was normal in tone, but it rang loudly in the clear, empty air.

Caught by some meaningful timbre in his tone, the others looked up. They were wary men, alert for danger and expecting it. They knew the chance they took, crossing Victorio's country at this time, and trouble could blossom from the most barren earth.

Big Red slouched over on the run-down heels of his worn boots. Mopping his face and neck with a bandanna, he stared at the tracks Bronco indicated.

Two horses had stood here. Two riders had dismounted, but not for long.

"Hey!" Clanahan squatted on his heels. "Those are kids' tracks!"

"Uh-huh." Bronco swore softly. "Kids! Runnin' loose in Apache country. Where yuh reckon they came from, Red?"

Red squinted off to the south and west. The direction of the tracks was but little west of their own route.

"What I'm wonderin' is where they are goin'," he said dubiously. "They shore ain't headed for nowhere, thataway, and right smack into the dead center of the worst Injun country!"

Smith stared off over the desert, shook his head wonderingly, then walked back to the spring and drank deeply once more. He was a typical man of the trail. He drank when there was water, ate whenever there was food, rested whenever there was a moment to relax, well knowing days might come when none of the three could be had. He straightened then, wiping the stubble of beard around his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Somet'ing iss wrong?" The Dutch-

man glanced at Red. "What iss, aboot a kid?"

"Couple of youngsters ridin' south. Boy, mebbe thirteen or fourteen, and a girl about the same age." He mopped his face again, and replaced his hat. "Mount up."

They swung into their saddles and Red shifted his bulk to an easy seat. The saddle had grown uncomfortably hot in the brief halt. They started on, walking their horses. It was easy to kill a good horse in this heat. Suddenly, the trail the kids were taking veered sharply west. Clanahan reined in and stared at it.

"Childer!" The Dutchman exclaimed in a puzzled voice. "Und vhy here?"

"They are shore headin' into trouble," Smith said, staring at their trail. His eyes stole sheepishly toward Clanahan, and he started to speak, then held his peace.

The Dutchman sat stolidly in the saddle. "Mine sister," he said suddenly, absently, "has two childer. Goot poys."

YAQUI JOE looked over his shoulder at their trail, but it was empty and still. Off on their far right a line of magenta-colored ridges seemed to be stretching long fingers of stone toward the trail the kids had taken, as though to intercept them. A tuft of cactus lifted from the crest of the nearest hill like the hackles on an angry dog.

Red's mouth was dry and he dug into his shirt pocket for his plug and bit off a sizable chunk. He rolled it in his big jaws and started his horse moving along the trail to the west, following the two weary horses the youngsters were riding.

Smith stared at the desert. "Glory, but it's hot!"

He suddenly knew he was relieved. He had been afraid Red would want to hold to their own route. Safety lay south, only danger and death could await them in the west, but he kept thinking of those kids, and remembering what Apaches could do to a person before that person was lucky enough to die. Thoughtfully, he slipped a shell from a belt loop and dropped it into his shirt pocket.

An hour had passed before Clanahan halted again, and then he lifted a hand. "Joe," he said, "come up here."

The four gathered in a grim, sun-beaten line. Five unshod ponies had come in from the east and were following the trail the youngsters had left.

"'Paches,' Joe said. "Five of them."

Red's horse seemed to start moving of its own volition, but as it walked forward, Red dropped a hand to the stock of his Winchester and slid it out and laid it across his saddle bows. The others did likewise.

Suddenly, with the tracks of those unshod ponies, the desert became a place of stealthy menace. These men had fought Apaches before, and they knew the deadly desert warriors were men to be reckoned with. The horses walked a little faster now, and the eyes of the four men roved unceasingly over the mirage-haunted desert.

Then the far-away boom of a rifle jarred them from their drowsy watchfulness. Red's gelding stretched his long legs into a fast canter toward a long spine of rock that arched its broken vertebrae against the sky. Suddenly he slowed down. The rifle boomed again.

"That's a Henry," Bronco said. "The kid's got him a good rifle."

Red halted where the rocks ended and stood in his stirrups. A puff of smoke lifted from a tiny hillock in the basin beyond, and across the hillock he could see that two horses were down. Dead, or merely lying out of harm's way?

In the foreground he picked up a slight movement as a slim brown body wormed forward. The other men had dropped from their saddles and moved up. Still standing in his stirrups, Clanahan threw his Winchester to his shoulder, sighted briefly, then fired.

The Apaches leaped, screamed piercingly, then plunged over into a tangle of cholla. Bronco and the Dutchman fired as one man, then Joe fired. An Indian scrambled to his feet and made a break for the shelter of some rocks. Three rifles boomed at once, and the Indian halted abruptly, took two erect, stilted steps, and plunged over on his face.

They rode forward warily, and Clanahan saw a boy, probably fifteen years old, rise from behind the hillock, relief strong in his handsome blue eyes.

"Shore glad to see yuh, mister." His voice steadied. "I reckon they was too many for me."

Red shoved his hat back and spat.

"You was doin' all right, boy." His eyes shifted to the girl, a big-eyed, too thin child of thirteen or so. "What in thunderation are yuh doin' in this country? This here's 'Pache country. Don't yuh know that?"

The lad's face reddened. "Reckon we was headed for Pete Kitchen's place, mister. I heerd he was goin' to stay on, Injuns or no, an' we reckoned he might need help."

Clanahan nodded. "Kitchen's stayin' on, all right, and he can use help. He's a good man, Pete is. Your sister work, too?"

"She cooks mighty good, washes dishes, mends." The boy looked up eagerly. "You fellers wouldn't be needin' no help, would yuh? We need work powerful bad. Pa, he got hisself killed over to Mobeetie, and we got our wagon stole."

"Jimmy stole the horses back!" the girl said proudly. "He's mighty brave, Jimmy is! He's my brother!"

Clanahan swallowed. "Reckon he is, little lady. I shore reckon."

"He got him an Injun out there," Smith offered. "Dead center"

"I did?" The boy was excited and proud. "I guess," he added a little self-consciously, "I get to put a notch on my rifle now!"

BRONCO started and stared at Red, and the big man hunkered down, the sunlight glinting on his rust-red hair.

"Son, don't yuh put no notch on yore rifle, nor ever on yore gun. That there's a tinhorn trick, and you ain't no tinhorn. Anyway," he added thoughtfully, "I guess killin' a man ain't nothin' to be proud of, not even an Injun. Even when it has to be did."

The Dutchman shifted uneasily, glancing at the back trail. Yaqui Joe, after the manner of his people, was not worried. He squatted on his heels and lighted a cigarette, drowsing in the hot, still afternoon.

"We better be gettin' on," Clanahan said, straightening. "Them shots will be callin' more Injuns. I reckon you two got to get to Kitchen's all right, and this is no country to be travelin' with no girl, no matter how good a shot yuh are. That Victorio's a he wolf. We better get on."

"Won't do no good, Red," Smith said suddenly. "Here they come!"

"Gleason?"

"No. More 'Paches!"

A shot's flat sound dropped into the stillness and heat, and the ripples of its widening circle of sound echoed from the rocks. Joe hit the ground with his face twisted.

"Got me!" he grunted, staring at the torn flesh of his calf and the crimson of the blood staining his leg and the torn pants.

Clanahan rolled over on his stomach behind a thick clump of creosote bush and shifted his Winchester. The basin echoed with the flat, absent-minded reports of the guns. Silence hung heavy in the heat waves for minutes a a time, and then a gun boomed and the stillness was spread apart by a sound that was almost a physical blow.

Sweat trickled into Red's eyes and they smarted bitterly. He dug into his belt loops and laid out a neat row of cartridges. Once, glancing around, Red saw that the little girl was bandaging Joe's leg while the Yaqui stared in puzzled astonishment at her agile, white fingers.

Out on the lip of the basin a brown leg showed briefly against the brown sand. Warned by the movement, Clanahan pointed a finger of lead and the Apache reared up, and the Dutchman's Henry boomed.

It was very hot. A bullet kicked sand into Red's eyes and mouth. His worn shirt smelled of the heat and of stale sweat. He scratched his jaw where it itched and peered down across the little knoll.

Across the basin a rifle sounded, and Smith's body tensed sharply and he gave out a long "Aaahh!" of sound, drawn out and deep. Red turned his head toward his friend and the movement drew three quick shots that showered him with gravel. He rolled over, changing position.

Bronco Smith had taken a bullet through the top of the shoulder as he lay on his stomach in the sand, and it had buried itself deep within him, penetrating a lung, by the look of the froth on his lips.

Smith spat and turned his eyes toward Red. "Anyhow," he said hoarsely, "we put one over on Gleason."

"Yeah."

Red shifted his Winchester and when an Apache slithered forward, he

caught him in the side with a bullet, then shifted his fire again.

Then for a long time nothing seemed to happen. A dust devil danced in from the waste of the desert and beat out its heart in a clump of ironwood. Red turned his head cautiously and looked at the boy. "How's it, son? Hotter'n blazes, ain't it?"

Later, the afternoon seemed to catch a hint from the purple horizon and began to lower its sun more rapidly. The nearby rocks took on a pastel pink that faded, and in the fading light the Apaches gambled on a rush.

Guns from the hollow boomed, and two Indians dropped, and then another. The rest vanished as if by a strong wind, but they were out there waiting. Clanahan shifted his position cautiously, fed shells into his gun, and remembered a black-eyed girl in Juarez.

A lizard, crawling from a rock, its tiny body quivering with heat and the excited beat of its little heart as it stared in mute astonishment at the rust-red head of the big man with the rifle.

*****

SHERIFF BILL GLEASON drew up. When morning found the posse far into the desert, he decided he would ride forward until noon, and then turn back. The men who rode with him were nervous about their families and homes, and to go further would lead to out and out mutiny. It was now mid-morning, and the tracks still held west.

"Clanahan's crazy!" Eckles, the storekeeper in Cholla, said. He was a talkative man, and had been the last to see and the first to mention that Big Red was on a trail. "What's he headin' west for? His only chance is south!"

Ollie Weedin, one of the Cholla townsmen, nudged Gleason. "Buzzards, Bill. Look!"

"Let's go," Gleason said, feeling something tighten up within him. The four they trailed were curly wolves who had cut their teeth on hot lead, but in the Apache country it was different.

"Serves 'em right if the Injuns got 'em!" Eckles said, irritably. "Cussed thieves!"

Weedin glanced at him in distaste. "Better men than you'll ever be, Eckles!"

The storekeeper looked at Weedin, shocked. "Why, they are thieves!" he exclaimed indignantly.

"Shore," someone said, "but sometimes these days the line is hard to draw. They took a wrong turn, somewheres. That Clanahan was a good man with a rope."

In the hollow hand of hills where the trail led, they saw a lone gray gelding, standing drowsily near a clump of mesquite. And then they saw the dark, still forms on the ground as their horses walked forward. No man among them but had seen this before, the payoff where Indian met white man and both trails washed out in blood and gun smoke.

"They done some shootin'!" Weedin said. "Four Apaches on this side."

"Five," Gleason said. "There's one beyond that clump of greasewood."

A movement brought their guns up, and then they stopped. A slim boy with a shock of corn-colored hair stood silently awaiting them in sun-faded jeans and checkered shirt. Beside him was a knobby-kneed girl who clutched his sleeve.

"We're all that's left, mister," the boy said.

Gleason glanced around. The eyes of Jaqui Joe stared into the bright sun, still astonished at the white fingers that had bandaged his leg in probably the only kindness he had ever experienced. He had been shot twice in the chest, aside from the leg wound.

Bronco Smith lay where he had taken his bullet, the gravel at his mouth dark with stain.

The Dutchman, placid in death as in life, held a single shell in his stiff fingers and the breech of his rifle was open.

Gleason glanced around, but said nothing. He turned at the excited yell from Eckles. "Here's the bank's money! On these dead mules!"

Ollie Weedin stole a glance at the sheriff, but said nothing. Eckles looked around and started to speak, but at Weedin's hard glare he hesitated, and swallowed.

"It was one buster of a fight," somebody said.

"There's seventeen Injuns dead," the boy offered. "None got away."

"When did this fight end, boy?" Gleason asked.

"Last night, about dusk. They was six of 'em first. I got me one, and he

got two or three with a six-shooter. Then they was more come, and a fight kind of close up. I couldn't see, as it was purty dark, but it didn't last long."

Gleason looked at him and chewed his mustache. "Where'd that last fight take place, son?" he asked.

"Yonder."

Silently the men trooped over. There was a lot of blood around and the ground badly ripped up. Both Indians there were dead, one killed with his own knife.

Weedin stole a cautious look around, but the other men looked uncomfortable, and after a moment of hesitation, began to troop back toward their horses. Gleason noticed the boy's eyes shoot a quick, frightened glance toward a clump of brush and rocks, but ignored it.

Ollie shifted his feet.

"Reckon we better get started, Bill? Wouldn't want no running' fight with those kids with us."

"Yuh're right. Better mount up."

He hesitated, briefly. The scarred ground held his eyes and he scowled, as if trying to read some message in the marks of the battle. Then he turned and walked toward his horse.

All of them avoided glancing toward the steeldust, and if anyone saw the sheriff's canteen slip from his hand and lie on the sand forgotten, they said nothing.

Eckles glanced once at the horse that dozed by the mesquite, but before he could speak his eyes met Ollie Weedin's and he gulped and looked hastily away. They moved off then, and no man turned to look back. Eckles forced a chuckle.

"Well, kid," he said to the boy, "yuh've killed yuh some Injuns, so I reckon youh'll be carvin' a notch or two on your rifle now."

The boy shook his head stiffly. "Not me," he said scornfully. "That's a tinhorn's trick!"

Gleason looked over at Ollie and smiled. "Yuh got a chaw, Ollie?"

"Shore haven't, Bill. Reckon I must have lost mine, back yonder."

They Get Their Man!

ESCAPING criminals, hearing the baying of bloodhounds on their track, have been known to collapse from sheer terror. There is something about the dog's name and his well-publicized ability to follow a track through thick and thin that has given rise to the belief that he must be a savage, relentless, man-eating beast.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Though bloodhounds have been used for years to track men, the dogs are actually so gentle and timid, that they have to be coaxed and fooled into following a trail by making a game out of it. If a bloodhound ever suspected the deadly serious business he was engaged in, he would probably collapse from fright instead of the criminal.

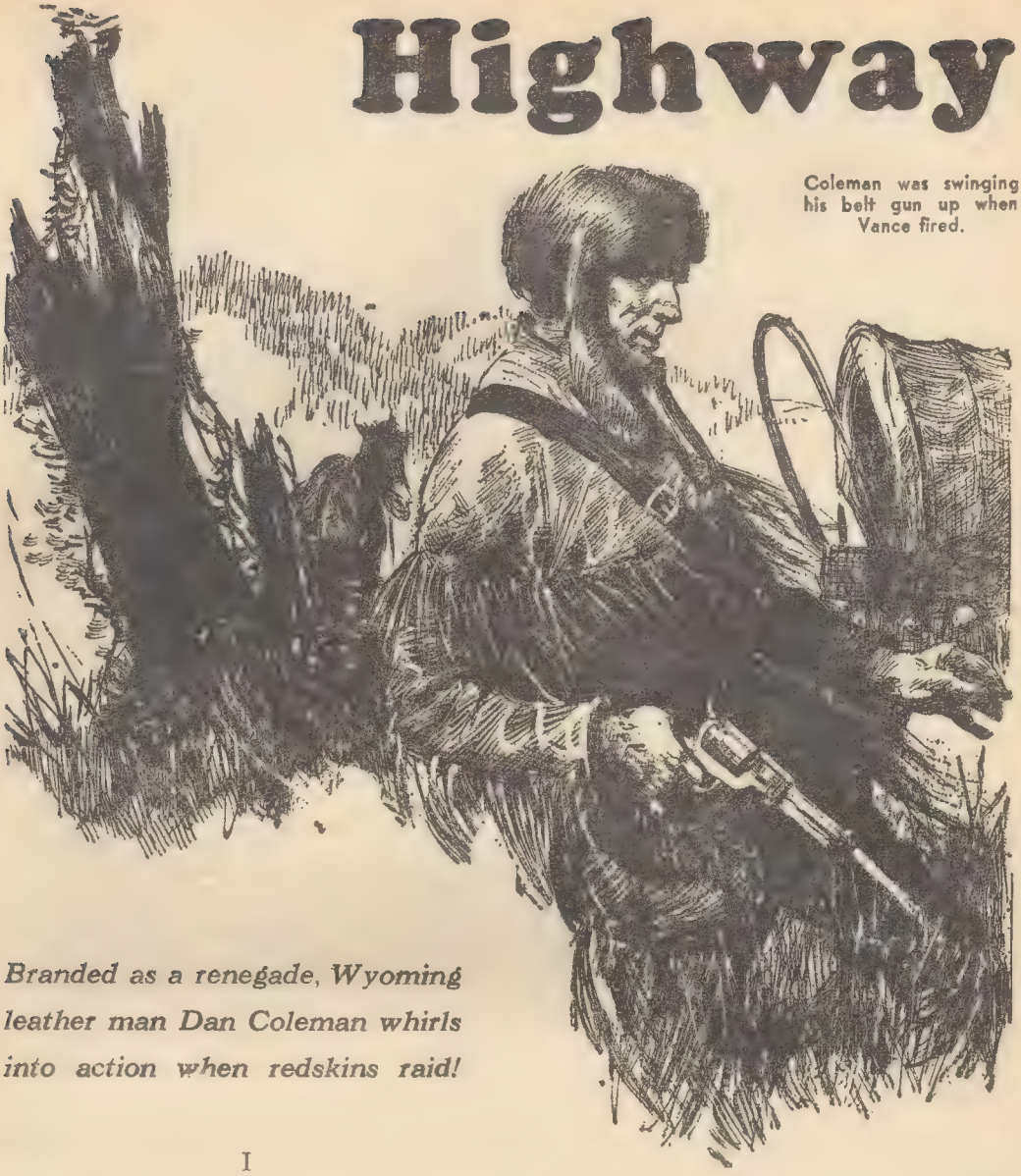
Widely used in earlier times, the man-tracking dogs were long neglected until recently when they were brought back by the Huntsville State Penitentiary in Texas. The experiment proving successful, Arizona followed by bringing bloodhounds to its Florence Penitentiary near Tucson.

Under Dan Moore, master of hounds at Florence, the dogs have done remarkable work in keeping tabs on the many tough characters who have tried to break out of the jail. There are numerous irrigation ditches in the range country around Florence and escaped prisoners always try to fool the dogs by wading in the ditches. But the bloodhounds, to whom this is all an exciting game, have learned the tricks too and they trail up and down the bank until they hit the scent again.

There's no getting away from them!

—Buck Benson

Highway



Coleman was swinging his belt gun up when Vance fired.

Branded as a renegade, Wyoming leather man Dan Coleman whirls into action when redskins raid!

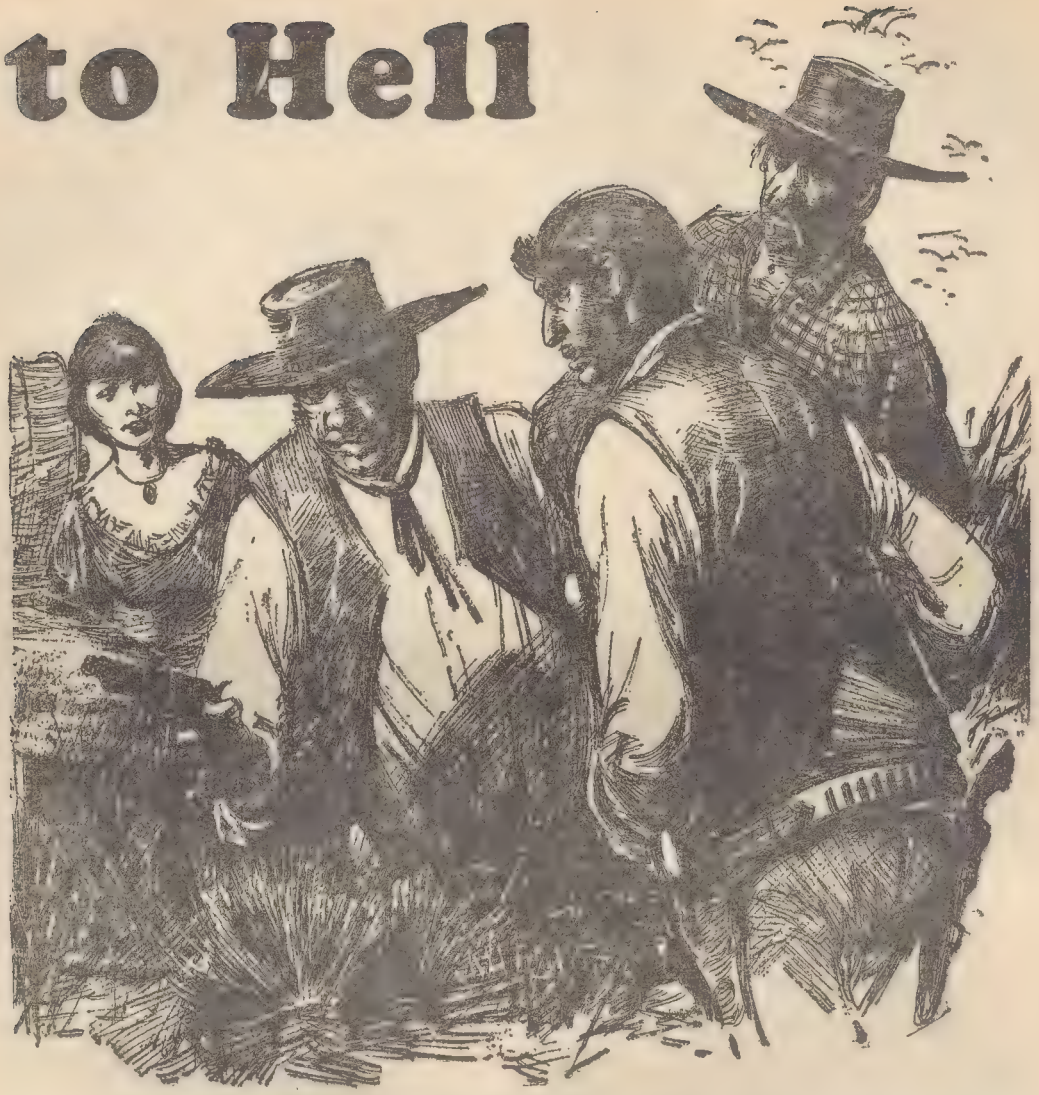
I

NORTHWARD and west from the fort on Laramie Fork, the country was a long, upward gray-green slant of sage and grass, tilting a little more sharply to slide through Muddy Gap, then leveling as it hit the placid, treeless course of the upper Sweetwater. Wyoming country, timeless with distance and alive with game. Indian country.

Dan Coleman watched the first wagon in the big string, which had been raising dust across the flats all morning, roll between the two jutting columns of slabrock which formed a gateway to the little meadow on the banks of the river. The tilt was slatting, the wagon rocking, the bulls yoked to it dragging it along at a fast clip in their haste to reach water. The second and third wagon came through the gateway. When the fourth appeared, Coleman gently kneed his horse and rode up from the brush.

He was seen immediately. There was an instant's stir of alarm. Then the occupants of the wagons eased, seeing

to Hell



a novelet by TOM W. BLACKBURN

that he apparently moved alone. Coleman smiled, but with little humor. There was this about all wagon men—they were ready to shout alarm when the odds were anywhere near their own strength, but when they held top hand, they were as bull-headed and bullying a lot as a man could find.

Maybe not by nature, but this country across which they rolled in increasing numbers was not something which could belong to somebody else. It was not something which had value, now or in the future, as far as they were concerned. It was only a hurdle of vast distance and semi-barrenness which lay between them and the Oregon and California hills for which they were headed. They didn't give a hoot for it or for anybody on it, so long as their own skins and rigs and animals were safe.

There was a woman among those who were swinging stiffly down from the first wagon. She turned to, unsnapping check-straps on the yokes and heaving them up so the bulls could walk out of

harness, working as swiftly and competently as any of the three men she assisted.

Coleman eyed her appreciatively. There was talk that when a man stayed out in the mountain country too long, seeing only Indians and Indian women, he got the wrong sort of an idea. He got himself all warped, so that he could pass up a smooth figure and pretty face without more than a good look, turning his attention to the practical side. Could a woman work the way a squaw did?

A sort of Yankee adoption of an Indian's practicality, when it came to women. Dan figured there might be something in this. His first approval of this one was of the work she was doing, of her matter-of-fact way of swinging into it. But then, he was doing more than taking a good look, too, so maybe there was hope for him, after all.

HE rode up close to the wagon, and before he could swing down, the girl had left off her work to glare back at him with rising color. He realized she probably hadn't had to face down a stare like this in a long time. He smiled at her and spoke before he considered the men.

"Howdy, miss."

"You got something to say, say it to me," one of the men said sharply.

Coleman turned in the man's direction. He was small, thinly built, with the hawkish set of features nature occasionally put on a man who had neither the body nor the nature to accomplish the things his ambition set for him. A restless, driving, occasionally reckless kind of man. There was a certain similarity between his features and those of the girl—the same attributes weakening his face while they strengthened hers. They were obviously brother and sister. Coleman shook his head at the man.

"Don't reckon I'll do that, either," he told the fellow. "What I got to say is to yore whole train. Supposin' I save my breath until the others come in."

The man shoved forward. "I said talk to me!" he repeated impatiently. "My name is Grayson. Lee Grayson. These are my partners—Abe McLeigh and Ben Vance. We own this string."

"You're forgetting something, Lee," the girl said quietly. "I own a share, too. You forget that a little too easily."

The quiet did not rob the girl's protest of its edge. Grayson colored a little.

"My sister," he said unwillingly. "Marian Grayson."

"I'm Dan Coleman, miss," Coleman said to the Grayson girl. "Might have heard of me."

The girl and the three men lost color at the sound of his name. Dan frowned a little. Gossip was the cussedest thing!

"Coleman!" the man who had been introduced as Ben Vance grunted. "Look, now, what is this?"

Vance was a fat man, with a fat man's occasional inability to keep the timbre of his voice to a deep level. Vance squeaked his query in an obvious struggle with a sudden fear.

"Keep yore hair on," Coleman advised him drily. "Listen to what I got to say and mebbe yuh won't lose it, at all. I been waitin' for yuh with a little advice."

"We heard about you as far back as Laramie, Coleman," Lee Grayson barked. "A blamed renegade that's been living with the Indians. Working a little business up for yourself, bleeding trains you came across, with a whole war-party of Shoshones to back you up."

Coleman looked around. "Don't see much of a war-party," he suggested mildly.

Grayson nodded.

"That's why I'm saying this," he said. "A man like you always gets bigger than his britches. Thinks he can carry a thing off by his lonesome, once it's gone smoothly a few times with help. Listen to me, mister. We put up the money for this train—bought every wagon, the stock, the supplies, even the farming gear in the boxes and the seed. Even the tools and equipment. Better than a hundred thousand dollars worth of stuff we're not going to lose. And the folks behind us laid out five thousand dollars a wagon for the right to travel with us, to own the rigs and stock and supplies when we've set them down in Oregon. A man will raise a lot of trouble to hang onto something he's paid five thousand dollars for. This is one outfit you won't bother any, Coleman!"

Dan Coleman blinked. This was something he had not heard about. This was ingenuity. A speculation in which the speculators rigged a train and sold emigrants a setup in Oregon, stock, goods, and free land, at a flat price, themselves

absorbing the risks of the crossing and gambling for nearly a full hundred per cent in profit. A way to make a fortune in a hurry.

"They don't get things straight at Laramie," Coleman told Grayson. "I live with the Shoshones once in a while, all right. I travel around occasionally with a war party of the younger ones. Old Washakie is glad to have 'em off his hands and out of the big tribal camp, ever' now and then. But I don't bother trains or trainmen none, Grayson."

Abe McLeigh spoke for the first time, his voice coming from the bottom of his cavernous chest, his eyes shrewdly on Coleman in measurement.

"No?" he asked. "We hear you'll go so far as to put a gun to a train captain's head to pry cash out of him, and all the while your bunch of cutthroats sit their saddles, just waiting for a wagon man to bow up and refuse the tribute you've named. That won't go with us."

"Shore," Coleman agreed quietly. "A man don't like to be robbed. But I don't ask somethin' for nothin'. These Indians out here are the ones that have got the worst of it. What I offer a train is safety, a guide who'll get 'em through the Sweetwater valley and over South Pass as quick as possible—and without trouble. I guarantee no Indian attack while I'm ridin' ahead of yore wagons. If yuh could see what has happened to a train or two up in here, yuh'd figger my price was cheap."

"How much from us?" McLeigh asked.

COLEMAN ran practiced eyes over the string still rolling down to water.

"Fifty wagons," he estimated. "Ten dollars a rig. Five hundred dollars, gold or Government paper, to see yuh over the summit of the Pass."

The three men in the group facing him exchanged swift glances. Lee Grayson rammed his head forward on his thin neck.

"Five hundred dollars!" he repeated. "For a guide's services across the best grass we've seen since the Platte. And that isn't robbery! Coleman, this is one train you shouldn't have corraled without your Indians to back you up. Too bad it's going to be your last one!"

The three men fell back from Coleman at the same instant. It was smooth, obviously rehearsed. They had plainly anticipated meeting him somewhere along the line, and likely the gossip at Fort Laramie had been that recently Dan Coleman had been approaching various strings without his Indian party in evidence. They were fools. Not all gossip was accurate. This was the thing he was trying to stamp out along the trail.

Bad faith was the root of almost all the trouble along the highway of slatting tilts. And this party was wiping out much of the good work he had been able to do in recent months.

With three of them against him, Coleman knew he had little chance. He slapped for the brass-bound butt of his belt gun, pulled it free and swung it up. He heard the Grayson girl cry out sharply to her brother:

"Lee, no!"

Then Ben Vance's gun fired, the fat man surprisingly making a draw faster than any of them. Coleman saw he was beaten before he even began pressure on his trigger. A hard blow slammed into him, twisting him partly around. His own weapon fired into the dust at his feet and he lost it. He spread his hands, knowing he was falling, and wanting to catch himself.

"Save your powder,"—he heard Vance's squeaky voice snapping a caution at the others. "That drew his sting!"

There was a grunt of commendation from one of the other men—McLeigh, Coleman thought. He caught a glimpse of Marian Grayson's white face. And a thought which went spinning into blackness with him.

These men did not know how big a mistake they were making. They did not know that Dan Coleman did more for wagons in the Sweetwater valley than bleed them of a fee he earned twice over, that he did not live a part of the year among the Shoshones wholly because he liked them, and that merely because there was no evidence of Indians about, wagon men should not jump to the conclusion Coleman had approached them unaccompanied.

There were Indians here—Elk and nine others, waiting in the brush. It was a good thing Vance had warned the others to save their powder. They would need it. Elk was Dan Coleman's friend

and his partner in this business with the wagon trains. Elk didn't give a care about odds when he was angry. And he would be angry, now. Elk believed, as few Indians did, that even an enemy was entitled to more warning than had been given his partner.

The blackness was illimitable. Coleman spun more deeply into it.

II

LIKE a rousing animal or a man who has spent much of his time in the open, Coleman was first aware of the odors about him. Trod earth was under his back and its dustiness was in his nostrils. The smell of smoke had been caught by the walls of an enclosure and held until it was stale. There also was a faint, rancid smell of hides so well tanned as to have almost no odor and noticeable now only because the sun was beating strongly against them. And the smell of greaseless cooking of meat, of other meat hanging in the air.

Coleman assimilated each of these, reading the message as a man might the pages of a letter or a book. And from them, he located himself. He was within a lodge, apparently in a large village. It was unlikely the ground would be either so dry or so hard packed under him, otherwise. It spoke of use for some time as a floor and the beating of many feet.

Pine smell was in the air, so he was back from the river and into the hills at least as far as the evergreen belt. It was a Shoshone camp, for there was an odor about all Indians, although it was seldom as strong as that exuded by Yankees.

This was the base summer village of the Elk's clan, high on the upper reaches of Beaver Creek, occupying a small bowl from which the entire spread of the headwaters country of the Sweetwater was visible.

Coleman stirred a little and found an immediate well of pain in his left shoulder. Ben Vance, then, had a fault common among men who handled their weapons a little too fast. He put too much jerking pressure on his trigger in firing, and his sights had climbed a little. Coleman thought the breadth of his hand lower would have put Vance's pistol ball accurately through his heart.

Elk's aunt, one of the few wizard-women Coleman had encountered among the mountain tribes, always summered at the headquarters village of the clan. His own presence here meant two things to Coleman—that Elk had been able to take him away from Lee Grayson and his partners without receiving serious injury himself, and that Coleman's own wound was not too dangerous. A practical Indian would not bring a dying man this far and a wizard-woman would not knowingly practice over one she could not cure.

There was only one thing in the messages his nose brought to him that Coleman could not decipher. In fact, he was not sure of its source. It was a faint, tantalizing aura of scent which could not necessarily be said to be a good smell, but which was nevertheless pleasant. It was more provocative than sweet. He opened his eyes to investigate it.

The light hurt for a moment, streaming brilliantly in through the open flap of the tipi. Then his eyes fined down to it and the gloom of the interior about him receded until he could make out detail. The lodge had been emptied of the usual contents of its kind, and its furnishings were now of Spartan Simplicity.

A heavy buffalo robe, folded once, was used for a bed in place of the tangled mass of hides and fur on which the average Shoshone contrived to sleep. The usual hearth had been filled in and smoothed over. His coat hung neatly bunched from a thong tie. His belt, his gun replaced in it, hung from another. His hat lay on a smaller hide to one side of him on the floor. The contents of his pockets were neatly arranged on this.

And beyond, opposite the doorway, so that casual inspection from outside would reveal any shift in position, Marian Grayson stood with uncomfortable stiffness against the rear wall of the lodge. Coleman was momentarily at a loss to explain the gracelessness of her stance until he realized she was lashed in this position, on her feet and almost incapable of even the slightest movement. Her bindings, he saw, were of rawhide so green and so tightly pulled that even the slow surge of her pulse in wrists and ankles must be a steadily repeated torture.

The girl was terribly pale. Strain had made a mask of her face. Fear was in

her eyes. And those who had lashed her in this position had not fussed with jacket sleeves which might have robbed the bonds of their punishment. The girl wore now only a skirt, and a loose sleeveless blouse of some unsubstantial material over her shoulders and upper body. The tightness of cramped muscles showed plainly through the blouse.

Coleman stirred. Marian remained rigid for a moment more, then the fear went out of her eyes and the tenseness of her body relaxed suddenly. She sagged downward against her bonds, not even wincing as her weight came against them.

Coleman understood, then. Wizard-women among certain of the tribes used curious cures. This was one of them. To the Indian mind, Marian Grayson had been in some measure responsible for the bullet in Dan Coleman's body. She had been with the man who had fired it. By some means, Elk had got hold of her—probably in his dash from the thickets beside the river to the place where Coleman had been shot down. Elk's had been a sudden, unexpected strike, against which even Ben Vance's swift gun, already emptied, had been of no value.

MARIAN GRAYSON had been brought with Coleman to the summer village and to Elk's aunt. The old woman had ordered the girl tied here in the firm belief that the more she suffered, the less Coleman would have to endure from his wound, and that the strength she expended fighting her own pain would be communicated to him.

Either the girl had been told, or she had guessed the truth. Had Coleman died, she would not have left this lodge alive. His return to consciousness had been a sudden relief before which she could no longer stand.

Coleman raised his voice in a sharp call. A woman appeared almost instantly in the doorway of the lodge.

"Where is Elk?" he asked.

The woman pointed into the distant valley.

"Where's the wizard-woman?"

The squaw pointed into the valley again. Coleman frowned. He had forgotten the train of wagons down there. The absence of Elk and his aunt at the same time was not good. Plainsmen did not believe all that an Indian did to prove the efficacy of a wizard's charms, but they had seen them alter Indian luck often enough to know they had a curious value of their own. If the wizard-woman was making signs against the train of wagons, the men in them were in for a hard time.

"Untie the woman," he told the squaw. "Give her water—whisky, if there is some in Elk's lodge. Quick!"

The squaw vanished soundlessly, returning in a moment with a small, ornate silver flask which was curiously out of place in this skin shelter. Using a woman's short knife, the squaw cut Marian Grayson's bonds.

Holding her upright for a moment in order to speed circulation in her feet, she pulled the unconscious girl once around the floor. Then, with a quick grin which betrayed the humor so few ever had opportunity to see in an Indian, she dumped the girl down on the hide bed beside Dan Coleman, handed him the little whisky flask, and ducked outside wordlessly.

Clumsily, rolling up on his wounded side as far as pain would let him, Coleman snapped the hinged cork from the flask, dribbled whisky onto Marian's cheek, and managed to get a swallow between her lips. The stuff had a fine, thick molasses look and the fulminate qualities of the best grade of French priming powder. Supposedly a product of Chris Carson's farms and trading establishment out of Santa Fe, it was variously called Carson's Carbolic, and Taos Lightning, but neither name did it justice.

The girl swallowed with difficulty, blinked her eyes widely, and abruptly sat up. Coleman was not surprised. He had heard of dead men who had been brought to life with a cupful of this thick brew, and he believed it

"All right?" he asked.

Marian stared at him, her eyes reaching along their parallel figures on the folded buffalo robe. They darted about the lodge and at the doorway, widening. Suddenly dark color suffused her face.

"How long have I—how long have I been—here?"

Coleman grinned. "Somethin' less than a minute," he said, but his tone let her know he was regretful.

Her coloring became more normal again and she started chafing her brutally marked wrists.

"You tell me what happened," Coleman suggested. "It's all right, now. Yuh're among friends—my friends. Tell me what happened."

"I don't know that I'm sure," Marian Grayson said. "There was the shot—Ben Vance's shot at you. We were watching as you fell. It seemed so sure that you were dead. I was angry, sick. I've tried to tell Lee that Ben is wrong in the way he wants things done. Then we heard running horses. Someone at one of the other wagons shouted. I looked up, and there were the Indians. One picked you up from the ground without dismounting. You vanished. He was carrying you on the outside of his horse, I suppose. And another ran at me. Lee tried to stop him, but missed with his gun and the Indian knocked him down with some kind of a hammer. I must have fainted, then. Or the Indian hit me, too."

"He hit you," Coleman said. "There's blood in yore hair, a lump on yore head. Indians don't take chances they don't have to, especially with women."

"The next thing I remember was this lodge," Marian told him. "Standing here with what felt like steel wire around my wrists and ankles. An old crone was making incantations. An Indian with a body like a cat and a terrible, handsome face was staring at me. They left finally, and I was alone with you. I thought you were dead. I thought they hadn't realized it yet, but that when they did, they'd kill me, too."

Coleman nodded. "If I had died, yuh'd have been lashed up on a burial platform with me," he agreed. "The Indian was Elk. Elk and his aunt, the wizard-woman. It's all right now, Miss Grayson. They're my friends."

THE girl pushed farther away from him, rising unsteadily to her feet and wincing with pain as her weight came onto her deeply scored ankles.

"Then what we heard about you at Fort Laramie is true," she said quietly. "You are a renegade, in league with the Indians of this valley and actually robbing the trains coming through here under pretense of guiding them!"

There was aversion in her eyes. A slow anger warmed Coleman. When there was talk among the wagons or along the river of Indians or of an Indian, or of a white man who lived part of his time with the plains people, the assumption was always of evil. It was like when men talked of the devil. None of them really knew much about the Prince of Darkness, actually—only that he was bad medicine. Wagon men did not know much about Indians, either, or about those of the leather men who had found good friends among them.

"How many buffalo did yore hunters kill for meat yesterday?" he asked Marian sharply.

She frowned in an effort at recollection. "I don't remember yesterday's hunt, but I suppose fifteen or twenty animals. That's usual. Why?"

"Because that's part of the reason I rode down to yore train," Coleman said. "My business was huntin', for a long time. A long enough time for me to know that two buffalo, skinned out and butchered right, would feed every soul in a fifty-wagon train with two hundred pounds of good stew meat left over. But twenty are killed, every day. Most of the carcasses are never used, so they attract wolves and make the herd move from the killin' grounds. The hides are left to rot.

"Ever see an Indian kill? There's little left but the bones when the squaws get through with an animal. Indians have had hard seasons in this high country. They ain't wasteful. Land doesn't mean anything to them, but the game rangin' it does. And the wagons are cleanin' that out—without need. To the Indian mind, there's only one answer—clean out the wagons."

The girl eyed Coleman with disbelief, scorn bred of what she had heard about him at Laramie pulling her lips into a straight line.

"Are you trying to tell me that you were sincere in claiming our wagons needed a guide through this valley—that the price you asked would actually guarantee us a safe crossing of South Pass?"

"I'm tryin' to tell yuh more'n that," Coleman said quietly. "Elk's people had already held council this spring when I came in. They had already made up their minds to destroy every whee' that reached their grass. Two strings of wagons had already been burned—with nobody left alive. The younger men of the tribe had discovered a new sport, safer than war with the Crows and more excitin'. I made a deal with Elk.

If he'd leave the wagons to me and back me up when I needed a show of strength, I promised him that useless killin' of game and destruction of grass in his valley would stop. I promised the wagons would all foller one track instead of spreadin' out over thirty or forty miles, as they have done."

"You persuaded a tribe of savages to give up deviltry that's second nature to them?" the girl mocked.

Coleman shook his head stubbornly. "No. Indians have got no more second nature than you have. They're right practical, Miss Grayson. Elk could see that my way of handlin' the emigrant problem—if it worked—was easier than attacks by his people on wagon strings, and not apt to cost him as many men or burn up as much powder. Because of that, he gave me a chance to prove I was right. In doin' that, he gave emigrant wagons a chance to get through here and across the pass in safety."

"To say nothing of giving you a chance to make yourself rich to the tune of ten dollars a wagon—with them guessing in St. Joe, when we left, that more than two thousand wagons will make the crossing this season, alone!"

"Wagon men are practical, too," Coleman said. "If I rode up to a string and offered to guide it for a hundred miles without charge, the captain would be so suspicious of me he'd run me out of his camp. Men don't work without pay. They wouldn't stop to think that I trade with these Shoshones, that when the tribe is at peace and quiet, I have enough business to pay me well for my time, to make it worth while to keep Elk and his people out of trouble if I can. I had to set up a charge to make the drovers listen to me, and ten dollars a tilt seemed fair enough."

"But it's still making you rich."

Coleman shook his head. "Remember I asked for gold or Government paper. Easy to carry. That money goes to Fort Bridger by runner. When enough is there, old Gabe sends it East. Berthold and Company, in St. Louis, carry it on deposit to the credit of the Shoshone Nation."

"Why should the red devils get it?" Marian Grayson asked bitterly. "What good is money to Indians?"

"What I'm trying to do here is only for the time bein'," Coleman told her. "When enough wagons have come along this trail, Elk and his people won't have this valley any more. There should be somethin' left for 'em. A good tribal store of Yankee money seems the best guaranty they could have."

III

THE girl dropped back down on the folded robe and began chafing her ankles. She studied Coleman with honest indecision on her face.

"What about our train, then?" she asked. "Ben Vance and McLeigh and my brother and the rest? They won't roll on and leave me in an Indian camp—not Lee and McLeigh, at least. The Indians in this little camp can't do anything against the men Lee can turn out of those fifty wagons behind him."

"This isn't the whole Shoshone Nation," Coleman said steadily. "This is just one clan—part family all related to each other, and part a club of young men who have grown up friends. If all the Shoshones turned out, two hundred wagons wouldn't have a chance against 'em, and that's liable to happen. Vance shot me without warnin'. Elk and his people will think yore whole train is as dishonorable as Vance."

"What can be done?" Marian asked anxiously.

"That depends on us," Coleman answered. "On how quick yuh can get circulation back through yore wrists and ankles, and on how tight yuh can tie up this bad shoulder of mine. There's a fresh shirt in my war-sack, there. Tear it into strips and get this wing strapped tight to my chest, so I can ride with it. Mebbe we can both be on our feet when Elk and his aunt come back up from makin' medicine in the valley. If we are, there may be a chance for the wagons."

"We have to escape, then?" the girl asked. "I thought you said you had influence with these savages."

"Escape? No. We wouldn't have a chance. I have got some influence here, but only if I'm on my feet. A sick man or a wounded one crippled so much he can't fight any longer don't have a say in an Indian council. That's a rule they've got, to keep the helplessness of some from influencin' the judgment of others."

Wordlessly, Marian Grayson untied the thongs holding Colman's war-sack

closed and pulled out the shirt he had told her to find. Sitting upright, he shrugged the blanket with which he had been covered from his shoulders.

Marian blanched at sight of the wound in his flesh. Coleman studied it and smiled grim satisfaction. Elk's aunt was a better wizard than most of them. There was ample evidence she had probed for and removed Ben Vance's pistol ball, and the wound had been reasonably well-cleaned.

Leaning back a little, he lifted the little silver flask the squaw had brought from Elk's lodge and sloshed some of the fiery liquid against the torn flesh, clamping his jaws against the wave of pain which resulted.

He glanced at Marian. She had lost all color. He grinned.

"If it begins to get worse," he said, "we'll have to undo it again and try burnin' out a little primin' powder in it. Save the sweat for then."

Marian stiffened and commenced ripping the shirt into narrow bands. Although her wrists must have pained her considerably and her fingers must have been still stiff, she worked with a smooth thoroughness, building a sling of the bindings which held Coleman's arm on his wounded side in tightly across his ribs, supporting the weight of that side of his torso with the bindings. Before she had finished he knew he would be able to walk, perhaps even to ride. It was a good job for a girl who was still more than half convinced she was saving the life of an enemy.

She had barely finished and Coleman had just drawn on his leather coat and set his belt and gun about his hips, when a shadow darkened the door flap of the lodge and two figures stepped in. One was an old woman, bent and ugly, but with brilliant, active eyes, deep set in her seamed face. The other was a man of medium height who appeared unusually tall because of the ramrod stiffness of his carriage and the perfect coordination of every movement of his body. His face had the immobility and strength of features carved in stone. He seemed surprised to find Coleman on his feet.

"The old woman's medicine is good," he said.

"The old one saved my life—this young one put me on my feet. I am a well man."

"With one arm," the Indian said.

"Do I need two, Elk?" Coleman asked flatly.

The Indian studied Coleman's face for a moment. He did not smile. He was incapable of this. But his eyes warmed. It was the same thing. He shook his head.

"Elk has not seen the time you needed more than one," he said.

"Then what is planned?" asked Dan Coleman. "What about the wagons on the river? What have you and the old one decided?"

"The brother of the woman, here, and two others, came out under a white man's pale flag when we sent scouts to surround the wagons and prevent them from moving until I could send to Washakie for more men from the main village of the tribe. The old one and I have talked with these three. There will be no trouble. Tomorrow the wagons will move on up the valley. They will be permitted to leave the place they are now in. You, my friend in leather, have taught Elk much of the business talk of the white men. Presently there will be much of the Government money to send to Fort Bridger for my people."

Coleman scowled. "How much?" he asked sharply.

"As much as you would have brought us from guiding two hundred wagons. Since there are only fifty in the valley, Elk has done good business."

"That's too much to tap those wagons for," Coleman protested.

ELK shrugged. He glanced at the old woman. She nodded sage approval.

"The three men from the wagons did not think so," Elk said. "And this is only the beginning. There will be more. Much more. It has been decided."

There was finality in this last statement. Coleman recognized it. Elk would not further discuss the subject. The wizard-woman and her nephew had made some kind of a deal with Lee Grayson and his partners. And it was some kind of a deal involving four times the levy he had been exacting from passing wagons.

It wasn't good. Elk's boast that he had learned the business way of the whites was dangerous. It was Indian nature—their intense practicality again—to recognize no limit to the demand they could make in a trade when the

edge was with them. Many wagon strings could not afford a forty-dollar fee per tilt for this brief crossing. Such a demand would inevitably raise fresh trouble.

However, Dan Coleman recognized the uselessness of attempting to discuss it further, now. He shrugged in his own turn and indicated the girl with a tilt of his head.

"She finds it strange here. She grieves to be with her brother. If you will have two horses brought in, I'll take her back to the wagons."

Elk shook his head again. "Since we speak in my tongue, she will not understand and I can tell you fully. It was her brother's wish she remain here, now that we have business together, and she will be safe."

"Save that talk for those who don't know you. You're keeping her to make sure her brother keeps whatever agreement you made with him!"

Elk's eyes warmed again, but he said nothing. Coleman turned to the door of the lodge.

"I'll take a horse alone, then. I better talk to those men at the wagons."

Elk shook his head for a third time. "The old one says you are still a sick man. She says it is fever that makes you stay on your feet. She says it will take time, here in this lodge, to cure you. As your friend, Leather Man, I can't let you sit a horse."

Coleman was not deceived by this use of the word "friend." He pulled back the flap of the lodge a little farther. Four of Elk's more violent-minded younger men—four who had thought from the beginning that Dan Coleman had engineered too gentle a treatment for invading wagons—tensed eagerly. All were armed.

COLEMAN let the flap fall.

Elk's eyes warmed with amusement once more.

"I think you will enjoy this sickness of yours much more if the white woman is left with you, Leather Man. I have so ordered it."

Turning, the Indian stepped from the lodge, followed by the old woman. She stopped outside the flap and drew a swift design in the dust.

Marian Grayson, baffled by talk she could not understand, but apparently realizing that something had gone wrong, started for the doorway. Coleman caught her with his good hand and wrenched her back. She pulled angrily away from him.

"Yuh want an arrow in yore throat?" he asked her sharply. He pointed to the marks in the dust outside the doorway.

"An old woman's scratching!" Marian said bitterly. "You make it sound like it was iron bars."

"Bars would be easier to get past," Coleman said solemnly. "A wizard-woman has a lot of power among her people, particular when she's as good as this one. Those marks are orders to the whole encampment to kill us if we step past 'em. And some of Elk's best killers are waitin' out there for us to try it."

"This is your influence with these devils, then!" the girl cried. "This is why you nad me make bandages for you! This is why you made me believe there was something we could do. What about Lee and the rest?"

"They're all right," Coleman told her grimly. "Elk and the old woman had a talk with 'em. About what, I don't know. But whatever it was, it pulled my teeth with Elk. He wouldn't listen to me. For the minute, we're prisoners."

"You sound like you think Lee and Ben Vance and Abe made some kind of an agreement with these Indians."

Coleman nodded.

"You think Lee and Abe would make an agreement that would leave me here?" she demanded. 'What possible thing could they hope to accomplish by doing that?"

"I don't know," Coleman said patiently. "That's what we've got to find out."

"By looking into the smoke, like that old woman does?"

"By waitin' for night. By actin' for all we're worth like we've give up hope of gettin' away on our own, like we think yore brother and his pardners will come after us and we're willin' to wait for 'em."

"Isn't that all we can do?"

"No. I've got a hunch that if we wait for that, we'll still be in this camp when you're as old as that wizard-woman. Yore brother and his pardners have figgered out somethin' so good that they can afford to pay Elk four times as much as I would have got for him from their train. And neither yore brother or his pardners struck me as bein' such generous men."

THE girl made no answer to this. She dropped back down on the robe where Coleman had slept and stared at the dust of the floor. He thought she was chewing upon something in her mind. He moved restlessly about the interior of the lodge, circling her, testing his body and the wrappings she had put on his wounded shoulder in an effort to determine just how far he could drive himself if there was need to drive at all. Each time he passed behind Marian, his eyes ran over her bent figure in its flimsy blouse and he decided there was one good thing about the situation at least. If Elk and others of his men were as covetous of a white woman as unattached wagon men often were of a squaw, there would be considerable to pay over this girl, already.

Bending, he rummaged in his possibles bag with one hand and finally brought out a light, beautifully worked fawnskin jacket which he carried for ceremonial appearances and for wear on his occasional trips into one of the posts of the American Fur Company, over on Missouri headwaters, two weeks north and east. He tossed this across Marian's lap. She looked up.

"All right," she said. "Up to now, I've been willing to believe you were exactly what drifters about Fort Laramie hinted you might be. I couldn't understand the talk you had with that stone-faced Indian a few minutes ago. I was ready to believe that there hadn't been any word from the train, that this story you've been trying to tell me was just an attempt to pass the responsibility for keeping me here to somebody else. This jacket makes it different."

"It isn't the shirt off of my back," Coleman protested. "We tore that up and I've got its remains wrapped around my shoulder. That's just an extra jacket I carry."

The girl nodded. "That isn't what I mean. I haven't been seven weeks already on the grass with wagon men and others without understanding something of men out here. The Indians tore my coat off me. I was hardly dressed under it for that. I understand I've got to stay in this smelly tent with you. I thought I'd have to stay half-naked, too."

"You look better than I do," Coleman said with a touch of admiration. "There's no hole in yore shoulder." His expression sobered again. "The sun will be down in an hour and it'll be cold."

The girl pulled on the jacket.

IV

COLEMAN found that moving about had set up a nagging ache in his shoulder. He sank down on the robe beside Marian. She looked at him steadily.

"There's something I've got to tell you," she said quietly. "The money Lee and the others used to buy and outfit that train came from a bank in Ohio, and when they took it, the money wasn't on deposit to their accounts."

"Stolen?" Coleman asked slowly. "But I heard you claim a quarter share."

"The wagon train was our idea, in the beginning. We both saw how many emigrants reached the river with money but no outfits, and had to buy what was needed there at terrible prices. It looked like we could save them money and make a profit ourselves by building a rig further east and selling transportation and an interest in it at St. Joe. I thought Lee was working for his share, and I did work for mine. Thirty-three trips on the *Missouri Belle* before I had the amount we had agreed upon and Lee had shown up. Almost a year, riding the Big Muddy, singing for two hours every night in the main saloon and double-locking my stateroom door every night when I went to bed."

"When yore brother showed up, he had his two pardners with him?"

"Yes. I never have liked Ben Vance. Abe McLeigh seemed better. I didn't know where they'd got the money, then. Only that counting them in, we could work a bigger string and for a bigger profit than Lee and I had decided on, and after the work on the river, that seemed good to me. I even warmed a little to Abe because Lee obviously wanted me to. Then, one night while we were still along the coasts of the Nebraska, the three of them got drunk and I overheard them boasting. I found out where their money had come from—all three of them handled the bank thing together. And I discovered why Lee wanted me to smile at Abe McLeigh. Abe had bossed the bank job and had taken the biggest cut. Lee talked him into throwing it into the wagon venture on even shares with the rest of us by promising to fix Abe up with me."

Coleman swore softly and silently.

"And you stayed with an outfit like that?" he asked.

"Back in St. Joe, I was responsible for finding us people to travel in our train. Most of them were good people, more than willing to part with five thousand dollars per wagon to get a rig, a promise of Oregon land, and safe crossing. They signed with us because I asked them to. I've had to stay to see they got what they bought."

"McLeigh and Vance and yore brother wouldn't deliver what they promised if you wasn't in the string?"

"I don't know," Marian said. "When they were talking about you, one night out of Laramie, Vance said you had the best set-up along the trail—a lot better money-maker than our wagons, even. And Abe said we were doing all right. He said there was a pretty good margin of profit in collecting for a full passage, but delivering only half of it. I couldn't figure that out, but a couple of days later we overturned one of the supply wagons. They wouldn't let any of the others near it and took half a day to get it upright again. No wonder they wouldn't let the other trainmen help them. Half the boxes of stores in that wagon were empty."

"Then the train must be about out of stores, now?"

She nodded. "I pinned Lee down about it. There isn't enough to see the wagons out of your valley, Dan Coleman. I think Lee and the others were planning to abandon the train here and head back to the river with all of the profits, after having earned only half of them."

"And leavin' the emigrants with a lot of empty boxes instead of the seed and tools and equipment they think they'll have when they open the crates in Oregon."

"Not only that, but I think they're planning to do the same thing all over again, if they can keep word of this affair from getting back to the river too fast. Does that explain why they speculated so much about you and why you forced every train to take you on as guide up the Sweetwater, why they turned you down when you made the same demand of them, why Ben Vance shot you without warning?"

"It explains a lot of things!" Coleman said tightly. "Now, listen to me. Elk will keep a close watch on us tonight. As close as he knows how, and a shadow couldn't get through that kind of a guard. But we've got to make it. We've got to get out to those wagons. Yuh've got to memorize what I tell yuh, and we've both got to move when we start. If we miss this, we won't get any second chance. . . ."

AT sundown, Elk returned to the lodge, his satisfaction with his own plans evident in his manner. He hunkered down, just inside the doorway.

"We are friends," he told Coleman carefully in the Shoshone tongue. "Leather Man has done much for me, for my people. We do not forget. You have seen the sign in the doorway of this lodge and have obeyed it. That is good. Obey it tonight, also, and when the sun is half a day high tomorrow, the wizard-woman will wipe it out. You will be free to move as you wish."

The Indian paused and there was again the light of amusement in his eyes.

"You will have recovered from your illness by then," he went on, "and the Elk will be happy to see you walk once more among the lodges of his village. There will be trading to be done, this time with the Government money you have taught us to use, and there will be more of the money to send to Fort Bridger. The Elk wishes you a good night's sleep. Enjoy the woman, Leather Man, and make no trouble. You have many friends here. It would grieve them to see you dead."

"Washakie is your big chief," Coleman said quietly. "He is an old man, his life grown long because of his wisdom. I had hoped one day to see Elk as old and as wise. I see shadows which say this won't be so. Elk is like a boy. He has learned a new game and thinks he can play it as well as those who have played it for years. Elk is proving himself a fool, and I grieve for him."

The Indian's face turned more stony. He rose to his feet.

"Leather Man talks too much!"

Coleman shook his head. "No, I haven't talked enough. You make an agreement with one company of wagons. There will be a hundred others. And what of the soldiers? They will not stay at Fort Laramie if there is business for them on the Sweetwater."

"The soldiers are strong," Elk admit-

ted. "But what is their strength? The Government money. Are Shoshones children and cowards that they can't be as strong as soldiers with this valuable paper to buy what is needed for strength? Your plan was good, Leather Man. With you to guide the wagons, the loss of game and grass was not high. But why should there be any loss, at all? Why should there be a single wagon among the Sweetwater? The wizard-woman has read the sign in the dust and the smoke of our fires. She has counted the wagons and the gods have approved. Even Washakie would applaud my wisdom. He will send the additional warriors I need. They will be here in the night. Remember my warning!"

Elk turned and left the lodge. Marian Grayson ran one hand through her hair — characteristic gesture when she was disturbed. Sharp concern was in her eyes.

"You made him angry," she said uneasily. "What's happening? Did he tell you?"

Coleman grinned ruefully. "An Indian never tells anybody somethin' he don't have to. About all the privacy a man has in the usual kind of village is inside his skull, and he's jealous of that. Elk was warnin' me we'd be killed if we tried to leave this lodge before noon tomorrow."

"But you were planning to try to escape tonight! And you with a wound which should keep you in bed!"

"We still have to," Coleman told her. "I can still move, with yore help, and yore pardners in that wagon train have come as far as they aim to come. If they leave the train, talk will get back to the river. But if the train should be wiped out by an Indian attack and they were the only ones to get away, they could tell about the kind of story they wanted to."

The girl paled. "No!" she cried. "Why, there are whole families in those wagons! People we've lived with for weeks. Maybe Ben would think of something like this. Or even Abe McLeigh. But not Lee!"

"He was with the others when they held up that Ohio bank."

Marian nodded soberly. "I know. It's been eating at him, ever since. Lee wants money more than anything else in the world—a lot of it. Things weren't easy for us when we were growing up, just the two of us alone. Kicked from one family to the next, always the dirtiest chores and the hardest work, with no time for anything else. He wants to be able to swagger down a street with people making room for him. He wants to smell like a gentleman and live like one. But that bank robbery made him sick, inside. He couldn't do this!"

"That's what the plan is," Coleman said soberly. "Elk didn't tell me, but it adds up. Your pardners have offered him forty dollars a wagon to wipe the train out. Probably at dawn, tomorrow. The forty dollars and the promise that a massacre now would discourage any other trains from taking a route along the Sweetwater has made Elk believe it's a good idea. He's sent for more men from the big Shoshone camp. They'll be in, tonight."

"Lee knows how I feel. He wouldn't do it!"

COLEMAN shook his head, and sighed heavily.

"Part of the deal with Elk was that you should be kept here, out of the way. That suited Elk. He wanted to hold yuh as guarantee yore pardners would carry off their end of it—probably spread the train out and bring in the guards. Everything to make it as easy for the Shoshones to ride over it as possible."

"I thought this Elk was your friend, that these people thought something of you!"

"I'm still alive, and Elk knows I'm shore to figger out most of what's planned. Indians don't like their plans known and it doesn't take much to kill a man. That's proof of Elk's friendship —that I've still got my scalp. And he left you with me—to amuse me, he said. That's as much proof of friendship as a man would ever get from these people. They're too practical to let even friendship go too far."

"Then we've got to get the train fast —tonight?"

Coleman nodded. "We've got to get out of this encampment without bein' seen, and we've got to get into the train camp the same way. We've got to quiet yore brother and yore pardners and get defenses set in the wagons before dawn."

The girl smiled wearily. "I'm beginning to understand why leather men

live a long time in this country," she said. "What you're talking about is like making a river run uphill—a one-armed man and a woman against a camp full of Indians. But you make it sound like we can do it."

"We have to," Coleman said simply. "There'll be a stir when the reenforcements come in from the main Shoshone village. Be ready to go, then. Try to sleep, now. I'll wake yuh up . . ."

It was a little after midnight when Coleman touched the arm of the girl lying beside him on the buffalo robe couch. He felt her stiffen at his touch and he knew she had not slept.

Beyond the skin walls of the shelter, the encampment had come alive. A few dogs were barking. Men talked excitedly. Greetings passed. And there was the sound of many horses. Coleman checked his belt for the hundredth time. Elk's friendliness or Elk's sureness in the security of his own plans or the Indian's vanity—one of the three—had made him leave Coleman's belt intact.

He knew without checking that the Indian would have taken the precaution, however, of drawing the charge from the barrel of his pistol. Nevertheless, the weapon was in its holster and his knife was in its sheeath. He would have need of both.

The additional men had come in from the main village of the Shoshones, evidence of sage old Washakie's faith in the judgment of young Elk and his band. Washakie, when he learned of what occurred here, would strongly disapprove, but the damage would have already been done. Elk had been shrewd enough to ask for additional men without specifying a reason. Otherwise, they would not have been sent. This Coleman knew.

He felt a little uneasy as he worked soundlessly to the back wall of the lodge. There was now no opportunity to check once more with Marian on the details of the plan he had outlined to her hours ago. And unless she followed her part of it without a flaw, the whole thing would not work. A wagon train would not die in the dawn light, but before that, two prisoners would die in the encampment of Elk's clan.

That one of the two was a friend, and would be mourned by the young clan chief would change nothing. Death would be certain if Dan Coleman and Marian Grayson were caught.

V

DAN COLEMAN was aware that Marian was also moving stealthily inside the lodge as he reached the rear wall, and he was grateful for the girl's grace. It made it possible for her to move without sound, also, although she could not have had previous experience with the kind of stealth needed here. Sliding his knife from its sheath, he found a seam in the skin covering of the tent, moved the point a little to one side of this, and thrust it through the thick, half-hardened leather.

The easy thing would have been to slice through the sinews of the seam, but its strands, in parting, would make a small severing noise. These, coming in quick succession as they must necessarily, would make a pattern of sound some listening ear might detect far easier than the long, unbroken sigh of keen steel moving through the full length of a hide.

Thrusting steadily, Coleman drove the knife downward. Sliding the steel back into his belt, counting under his breath for timing, he stepped through the slit in the covering and pulled the gun. Without powder, the weapon was still lethal. A pistol barrel wrapped around a skull was silent, although a man involuntarily cried out at the impact of a bade, no matter how skillfully it was driven.

Still counting under his breath, Coleman edged around the base of the tipi. Two dozen yards away, a number of the new arrivals were milling about the front of Elk's lodge. The attention of everybody in the camp was on these. The man stationed outside of the prison lodge for the night was also looking toward the center of the camp. As Coleman neared the hundred count he slid up beside the man, no more than a pair of yards away, just a little too far to reach. There was a stir in the doorway of the lodge. The guard's attention shifted swiftly to it. Marian appeared there, thrusting her head out through the opening.

The guard made a sharp gesture with the small belt-hammer in his hand and snapped a guttural command. In that instant, Coleman lunged. His pistol chopped downward. The Indian sagged forward into Marian Grayson's arms. Staggered, wrestling frantically with

the man's weight, Marian dragged him into the lodge. As he went on past the entrance, Coleman heard a soft sound as she spilled him down on the floor, out of sight. Coleman's stride reached out.

These were the difficult moments, the dangerous ones. There were horses on a small patch of grass two dark tipis away —the usual little ready reserve held within the confines of a Shoshone encampment for emergency use during the night.

Coleman reached these, swiftly picked the nearest, slipped its hobbles, and led it through the darkness, keeping the animal between himself and the crowd about Elk's lodge, and holding its pace to a slow walk, as though the horse were drifting of its own accord. When he reached the back wall of the lodge he found that Marian had somehow managed to hoist the limp guard's body half through the slit he had made in the covering. Coleman shoved his good shoulder under the man, forced him up across the back of the horse, and lashed his ankles together under the animal's ticklish belly. With the man sprawled forward along the horses neck, he lashed the Indians wrists together under the animals throat, also, making a series of swift hitches with his good hand.

In this position, the man would not spill off, and a few hundred yards of the kind of riding he was in for would rouse him sufficiently to insure he stayed on the horse. The tied wrists would keep him from regaining control of the anmal long enough to provide the diversion Coleman wanted.

Unsnapping his belt, Coleman brought it sharply across the horses rump in a stinging blow. The animal leaped ahead, plunging for the darkness and automatically shying away from the other lodges and the heart of the village. With luck, Coleman thought the horse would run dead across the grass until it reached the bunching ground where the rest of the encampments horse herd was held. This would be far enough.

Seizing Marian's hand, Coleman shouted a high, warning yell with the second jump of the horse. Jerking the girl along with him, he ran swiftly along behind the lodges toward the balance of the reserve horses.

Coleman's yell hauled the Indians in front of Elk'slodge sharply about. Elk and several of his men, identifying the source of the sound and seeing no sign of the guard left stationed outside the lodge in which Coleman and the girl had been held, sprinted towards the sound. One carried a torch. They lunged into the tent, discovered the slit in the rear wall, and crowded out through this. They saw the tracks of the horse in the dust there and heard the receding noise of the departing animal. An instant alarm was shouted. Several of the new arrivals, their mounts still at hand, swung up and hammered out into the night.

CROUCHED beside the camp's spare horses, Coleman kept a tight grip on Marian's arm and waited, teeth gritted against the pain pulsing in his shoulder. This, also, was a thin spot. Elk and those with him doubled a few paces toward the racing horse. Then Elk, apparently deciding that the men already mounted were sufficient pursuit, and possibly puzzled over the complete disappearance of the guard left stationed outside Coleman's quarters, turned back toward his own lodge, shouting orders.

Coleman handed Marian the hackamore to one horse and led the other himself, working free of the camp limits in the opposite direction to that taken by the horse bearing the unconscious guard.

Moments ran swiftly together. The tumult in the camp faded. And in half a dozen minutes, still not speaking, Dan Coleman nodded an order to Marian to mount. With careless freeness, she swung up. That the hem of her skirt bunched and rode well above her knees did not appear to disturb her. Coleman was glad of that. There were, he thought, better places for appraisal of the legs so revealed, or for feminine modesty.

Lifting the pace of his horse carefully and keeping to thick grass, where the sound of hoofs would be muffled, he began to work a wide, swinging circle which would take them far beyond the wagon encampment in the valley before they cut back toward it.

Elk would certainly know that they would head for the wagons. But this circling would make it possible to elude Shoshone riders, Coleman thought. Whether they would be able to reach the

wagons in time to give much warning of the trouble heading toward them with the rising sun was something else. Marian Grayson held her horse abreast of Coleman's, staying gamely on the back of the animal, although he thought this kind of hammering riding must be punishing her unmercifully.

Minutes stretched into an hour—into two. The eastern norizon began to grow light. They were well down into the Sweetwater valley, cutting back up its length, and still Coleman had not been able to locate a wink of light to betray the location of the train.

It seemed almost certain that the wagon men could not have been so completely oiled by Lee Grayson and his partners that they would not have continued the general practice of outriders, guards, and at least one night fire. The darkness of the string troubled him gravely. Once he pulled up to ask the girl if she had seen sign of light.

Breathless, conserving energy, she shook her head. Coleman nodded and lifted his animal into a lope again. A little later, he paused once more to breathe the animals. Marian shot him a questioning glance, loaded with increasing alarm, but said nothing, still.

They rode on. Light increased. Coleman began to grow uneasy that Shoshone lookouts would be able to spot them soon. Certainly the Indians were by now beginning to close in on the wagons.

Suddenly Marian cried out sharply. Coleman's head swiveled in the direction she was looking. The darkness of the train was readily understandable. Every bull was in yoke, the camp was broken, and the string was moving, a thin, long line, as vulnerable as wagons could be—hopelessly open to attack by even inferior numbers.

Marian, familiar with the train, saw something Coleman missed. Grayson and his partners had got the wagons rolling long before dawn on some kind of pretext, guaranteeing the attacking Indians the easiest kind of a target. But they had not themselves rolled with the main company. On the banks of the river, two or three miles from the main party, sat one wagon with its yokes out of harness and with one wheel detached and leaning against the sideboards as though repairs were under way.

"That's the lead wagon," Marian said. "The one our strong-box is in. And most of the supplies left to the train are in it, too. That's the wagon I slept in. Ben and Abe McLeigh—and Lee—must be with it!"

Coleman nodded soberly. He looked at the train, rolling slowly across the grass. The quickest thing would be to ride down and head it off. But he knew the men in it had believed their leaders, believed that this early morning drive was safe and the wisest idea, possibly to escape Dan Coleman, himself.

And he suddenly realized there was a facet to Grayson's plans he had not seen before. If there were survivors from this attack, the fault would not be charged to Grayson and his partners, but to the leather man who had tried to serve as intermediary between the restless Indians of the Sweetwater Valley and the wagons crossing the river. No warning he could give among the wagons would be heeded. The wagon men would think it was a trick, at best.

Marian might have a chance with them. It was worth a try. If not, he knew he would have to take Grayson or one of the others and force the man he captured to warn the train in language they would believe.

"Get down there fast!" he told the girl. "Tell them to circle immediately. Tell 'em yore brother sent yuh, that yuh got away from the Indians and brought him word there'd be an attack. Tell 'em yore brother said for 'em to circle at once, but to hold their fire till the first wave of the attack is a hundred yards away, and then to fire their first volley just over the heads of the Indians. Tell 'em that, and make 'em believe that's what they have to do. It's important!"

"The first volley would be the most important one," the girl protested. "If they waste that—"

"Tell 'em what I told yuh!" Coleman snapped. And he reined away.

THE lead wagon, wheel off, was too clearly in the open for a stealthy approach and time was too short for it, anyway. Coleman set his horse directly for the lone tilt, then hauled up suddenly. Jerking his pistol from his belt, he reached into his little cap-case, attached to his belt.

A white man would have emptied this, also. Elk had not thought of it.

Coleman charged his gun, primed it carefully, and capped the nipple at the base of the barrel with a cap crimped a little with his teeth so he was sure it would not slip off. Satisfied that he had a command which one of the men in the wagon would have to heed, he rode on straight toward the tilt beside the river.

Abe McLeigh and Ben Vance were standing outside the wagon, giving apparent cursory examination to the hub from which the missing wheel had been removed. McLeigh saw Coleman first. He swung a little around, putting his back to the side of the wagon. Ben Vance remained squatting on his heels, his rotund body all easy relaxed lines. He was grinning. His belt gun was slung forward, the butt resting at an angle to his round belly.

Coleman eyed the tilt above the men uneasily. He did not share Marian's faith in the limits beyond which her brother would not go. He wished Lee Grayson were out in the open, where he could be seen, also. But Grayson was the following kind, the reckless and narrow kind which could hunker down behind a canvas shelter like this and put a bullet into a man's head to keep something for which he had worked from falling apart.

When he was ten yards out from the wagon, Coleman reined up and dropped the hackamore to the pony's neck, freeing his good hand. Ben Vance grinned at him.

"If I was a superstitious gent, Coleman," he said, "I'd figure I was looking at a ghost. It was something, the way those Shoshone friends of yours popped out of the brush the minute I nailed you, but when I knock a man down with lead, he usually stays there."

"Where's Marian?" McLeigh cut in sharply.

"Mebbe yuh'll get a second try, Vance," Coleman told the fat man. Turning his glance to McLeigh briefly, he answered him, also. "Marian's takin' a message from her brother and you two down to those wagons. This game won't go. Any of it. Elk ain't goin' to burn those wagons. You boys ain't goin' back East, except with a rope around yore necks. Yuh got one choice—get to those wagons and help 'em fight out of the tight yuh've rammed them into! Call Lee Grayson out here, and tell him to come easy."

Ben Vance grinned again.

"Oh, he won't give you any trouble to speak of, Coleman," the fat man said. "Abe, you better climb in there and give the boy a lift. Coleman wants him out where he can be seen."

VI

McLEIGH shrugged and climbed ostentatiously into the wagon. Coleman watched him do it with increasing uneasiness. While he was hidden, there was only one of these three he could watch. However, there was no overt move from the wagon.

McLeigh appeared at the ties in a moment, supporting Lee Grayson's limp figure. He spilled the man out onto the driving seat, swung to the ground, and callously jerked Grayson on down, propping him in a sitting position against the front wheel. Coleman swore softly to himself.

He thought Grayson was dead. The man should have been. He had been mercilessly hammered. His head had been split open with a heavy blow. Fists or perhaps a club had been swung against his face. A spongy red patch on his shirt spoke of a body wound. His head rolled limply on his neck. He sat against the wheel of the wagon like a half-empty sack.

"Kind of squeamish," Vance said. "That's Lee's trouble. Got to thinking in the middle of last night that we were going too far. Got to worrying about what his sister would think of our plan. Got to worrying about her being over there in that Indian camp with you and those redskins. He got right troublesome finally, Coleman. Abe and me had to pound some sense into him or he'd have spilled the whole thing to the wagon men before we got them rolling. You want to look like Lee?"

Coleman shook his head slowly.

"Well, you've got only one wing," the fat man said. "You just plain forget about that gun in your belt and slide off that horse. We'll sort of sit here, the four of us, till we see what your friend Elk does to those wagons. If he does the job right, maybe we'll turn you back over to him on a promise he'll keep you out of circulation till we're clear of the country."

"And till you've got this whole thing nailed on me!" Coleman said. "Quit

tryin' to scare me with Grayson. His sister tried to tell me he wouldn't go the whole way with you—that there were some things he wouldn't swallow. I wouldn't believe her. I figgered I'd have three of yuh to face down here. You and McLeigh have done me a favor in takin' Grayson out of it. Time is short. You goin' back to the wagons with me or not?"

Ben Vance slowly shook his head, then struck suddenly with his disconcerting speed for his gun. Coleman had been watching for the beginning of this move. His hand had already slid under the surcingle ahead of him. As Vance began his draw, he lunged on forward, driving his good arm under the rope, and then swung to one side, a curious adaptation of the Indian trick of riding on the blind side of a horse. With the animal's body momentarily between himself and Vance and with his arm jammed to the shoulder under the surcingle and so holding him in place, Coleman jerked his gun on free.

Lifting the weapon under the throat of the dancing animal, he flung a quick shot. Vance came to his feet in a galvanic leap, crashed into the exposed wagon hub beside him, and folded limply over it.

Coleman's horse shied violently at the explosion of the gun, breaking the grip he had kept with his knees and thighs on the animal's barrel. He slammed to the ground, his good shoulder and the arm holding his fired gun twisted mercilessly in the surcingle, still. The horse dragged him a pair of jumps, turning the blind side toward Abe McLeigh, who was waiting with his gun drawn.

Struggling frantically to free himself from the horse, Coleman did not see clearly what happened beside the wagon. He had a vague impression of two men on their feet where there should have been only one. He heard McLeigh's gun fire and felt the quiver in the animal as the bullet plowed into the Indian pony he had been riding. Then his arm slid free, he rolled like a cat, banging his bad shoulder heedlessly, and rocked onto his feet.

McLeigh was struggling savagely with Lee Grayson. The battered man was little more than half-conscious. A dark stain of blood was on the dust under the place where he had been dumped against the wagon wheel. One arm hung uselessly beside him. His other hand was fastened tightly in McLeigh's heavy shock of hair and he was hanging on with an ebbing doggedness. McLeigh clubbed at him frantically with his own emptied gun. The sound of the blows against Grayson's unprotected head made Coleman wince.

He lunged toward the two just as Grayson's grip loosened and he spilled down into the dust at McLeigh's feet. The big man pivoted. Coleman flung his empty gun at him. McLeigh dodged it and charged, his clubbed pistol again upraised. Coleman backed, brushing against Vance's body, where it was draped over the wheelless hub of the wagon. His hand, reaching behind him, encountered iron, the heavy casting of the hub wrench, lying on the jutting axle timber. His fingers closed. He brought it around in a sharp, lashing movement, and released it with the full, driving force of his own desperation behind it. It struck Abe McLeigh between the eyes and the big man buckled.

COLEMAN dropped clumsily beside Lee Grayson and tried to turn the man. He tried only once. More blood was under Grayson's body, now—more blood than any man could lose and live. He straightened slowly and looked off across the grass toward the string of wagons.

Marian Grayson had apparently made the emigrants in the train believe her. It was already pulling into a great circle which would tighten swiftly. And as he looked, a thin, high ululation shattered the morning stillness.

He could not tell if the gunfire at the single wagon which had remained behind or the circling of the train itself had signaled the attack. But Elk's warriors broke from cover on two flanking sides of the string of wagons and rode recklessly toward them, their shouting rising in pitch.

Two saddle horses were tethered on the far side of this lead wagon. Coleman pulled himself into the saddle of one of these, hugging the arm Marian Grayson had bound to his side even more tightly against his ribs in an effort to stifle the surging pain there. The girl had followed the first of his instructions. She had stopped the train and made it circle. If she followed the second, there might still be a chance for the wagons—

a chance that men in the tilts and men on the backs of the Indian ponies racing toward them, who otherwise might die, could live.

Riding as hard as he could drive the horse under him but well aware he could not make the nearest of the wagons before the Shoshone charge boiled up to it, Coleman watched with a prayer. There was a quarter of a mile between the Indian charge and the wagons, then half that, then half again. The Shoshones started firing their trade rifles. No answer came from the wagons. Distance narrowed swiftly. Suddenly, when it seemed to Coleman that the Shoshones must certainly ride in full among the wagons, a concerted volley broke from the still circling tilts.

He watched anxiously as the Indian line pulled frantically up and veered away, but not an Indian pony wheeled riderless. Coleman eased in his saddle with the first relief he had known in a day and a half. The Indians continued to withdraw, bunching as for a parley.

Coleman hammered on toward the wagons, clinging unashamedly to the pommel of the saddle. The valley of the Sweetwater was a most unsteady place before his eyes. He heard himself hailed. He realized someone had ridden out from the wagons and had caught the bridle of his horse to slow it and lead it in. Then the animal halted under him. He made an ineffectual attempt to dismount, and spilled loosely to the ground.

The odor he had noticed when he first roused in the lodge in Elk's village was briefly in his nostrils again—woman scent. He reached for a hand and clasped it.

"Yuh were right—about yore brother," he told the girl he could not see. "Lee—Lee got McLeigh first." Then, raising his voice a little, he spoke to the men he sensed about him. "Get me into a wagon—out of sight. Get ready for a parley. Elk—the Indian chief—Elk will come in—for a parley. Tell him yuh've talked to me, tell him yuh've hired me for a guide through the valley. No trouble—now. . . ."

A wagon was jolting under Coleman when he roused. The sun was a bright spot on the tilt against which it shone. The thick, almost salty taste of the crimson dust of Red Rock Canyon, leading into the approaches of South Pass, was on his tongue. And Marian Grayson was a silhouette between himself and the ties of the wagon hood. He half sat up, trying to understand the movement and the distance the wagon in which he rode had already come from the place where Elk and his men had attacked the Grayson train. Marian pushed him flat on the mattress on which he lay.

"We decided we had better keep moving," she said. "We had the tracks of other trains to follow. Seeing that the Shoshones believed you were guilding us and withdrew because of that, we didn't think we had better stay circled, even if you couldn't tell us what to do."

This was shrewdness. Coleman nodded approval.

"The others wouldn't let me see Lee before the burial at the lead wagon," the girl went on. "I think I understand. You were really against three men there. I'm sorry, Dan."

"No. Yuh should know. Lee had already had his quarrel with the other two when I came up. He was as good as dead, then. But he had enough life, enough sand, to give me a hand when the odds were all wrong against me. There have been worse brothers than yores, Marian. It's the last hand that counts."

SHE brightened with a deep gratitude. Coleman realized that her bitterness toward Lee Grayson, her disapproval of his methods, had never erased the affection built out of a childhood when it had been the two of them against the world. The manner of his death was important to her, and to know the truth cut most of the grief from his death.

"I think we made your friend Elk understand, Dan," she said. "I don't want to go on to Oregon. With the leaders of the emigrants to watch, I opened the strongbox in the lead wagon. There was a lot of money there. It seems Elk had promised Chief Washakie four times the usual contribution to the tribal fund you began if he would send the extra warriors which came in just before we left the camp. Elk was worried over what he would tell the old chief. So I agreed this once to give him forty dollars for each wagon in the string.

"Part of the money in the box I kept as my profit for my investment. A little more I kept to pay you for enough

stores to take the train on down to Fort Bridger, where it can restock. Elk sent a man to show me where you keep your trade goods stored. The rest of the money went back to the emigrants. It was theirs in the beginning. And they will have to hire their own guides and stand their own expenses the rest of the way to Oregon."

"What are you goin' to do, then?" Coleman asked. "Stay in this country?"

He tried to keep the hopefulness from his voice, but he could not. A leather man wanted a wife as often as the next man, but there were few women who could fit the life of this country. This one could; she had made a successful deal with Elk of the Shoshones. She smiled at him.

"I'll answer that when you tell me why you wanted the first volley fired from the wagons to be aimed over the heads of the Indians. That was the hardest thing I had to sell to the emigrants. It turned the Indians back, but how?"

"I told yuh these Indians ain't savages or devils or killers, but just practical men—practical men. They were chargin' a train they thought was helpless. Fire is withheld till they are within certain target range. Then a volley is fired deliberately over their heads, emptyin' what they think might be every gun in the train. Plainly it was a warnin'. Naturally they pulled up and retreated. A company of men who could afford to fire a warnin' volley under such circumstances must shore have some kind of reserves the Indians couldn't know about—and Indians don't like to plow into somethin' when the odds facin' 'em are somethin' they can't figger beforehand. It's easier to ride in and parley—and less blood is spilled."

"You knew Elk would act that way if the wagon men did what you told them?"

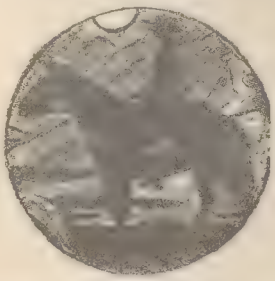
"I was sure enough to risk it," Coleman admitted. "What about my question, now?"

"A man has to learn things in this country, like you've learned about the Shoshones. A woman can't do less and get along. And the first thing I'm tackling is an Indian's practicality I don't need to be told that you're going to stay here, trading a little and making sure that wagons get through this valley without trouble and without stripping the grass of the game the Indians need. I don't need to be told that a man has to have a wife. So I'm staying. You think I want you to get reckless, and have Dan Coleman turn into a squawman?"

Coleman reached for her with his good arm. She moved back beside him, finding a place on the mattress on which he lay. She looked at the bright spot of the sun on the tilt over their heads, also.

"This is the way we began, isn't it?" she asked quietly.

She was thinking of the buffalo robe couch in the lodge in Elk's village. Coleman was not. He was thinking of the days ahead, of the hours of jolting along, undisturbed, before the head of the valley and the summit of the pass were reached. It was good thinking.



FEATURED IN THE NEXT ISSUE

TALLY THE LONG YEARS

An Exciting and Powerful New Complete Novel of Men Who Lived and Died by the Law of the Gun on the Untamed Range!

By WILLIAM HOPSON

Gun Pards

A 'Jacob Green' Story

by A. LESLIE

EAST from Maley, in southwest Texas a trail wound across the level rangeland, climbed the long slopes of a range of low hills and vanished through a dark and narrow notch in the hill crests. Beyond the hills it flowed onward over prairie and desert, through fertile valleys, over towering ridges to reach the far-off Nueces country and the valley of the Sabine. It was a well-traveled trail, for it was the gateway to the Southwest.

Morning sunlight was pouring over the hill crests like a flood, but the narrow notch was still thronged with shadows and ghostly mist wreaths. Suddenly through the curtain of mist burst something that gleamed like a star in the gloom.

It rolled forward, resolved into a great white object swaying and lurching. Eight plodding horses took form, dragging the huge vehicle by straining traces. Another star burst from the mist, and another, and another, until

The farmers were streaming out, shouting greetings, and the canvas had been drenched.

The shadow of intolerance crosses the path of a wagon train, but when men join to fight a common enemy differences are forgotten!

nearly two score of the great wains were rumbling down the trail to the level rangeland.

Covered wagons! The "ships of the prairie," the vanguard of empire, slow, methodical, resistless in their advance. The old trail had known them before, as had the trails to the north and the trails to the south. Gold-hunter, adventurer, home-seeker and Mormon had used them in their onward march to the blue waters of the Pacific.

The wagons were an old story, now. No longer did they startle the Indians of the plains and the mountains and send them flying to their fellows with tales of ghosts and demons riding the wings of the wind. The Indian understood them, now, knew them to be the symbol of an irresistible force that would in the end sweep the red man from the land. The accomplishment, in-

deed, was no longer a vision of the dim future but a swiftly resolving fact.

Beside the wagons rode men on horseback, lean, gaunt men for the most part, with watchful eyes, ready rifles hooked under their arms. Their gaze was to the front, these lean soldiers of the sod, their eyes still hopeful, but shadowed by hardship and disappointment.

IN the forefront rode a blocky alert-looking young man. This was Van Worthington, the appointed leader of the train, whose word was law. The tall, amazingly gaunt, burning-eyed horseman at his side was the Reverend Elijah Crane, the pastor of the church to which the emigrants had belonged in far-off Kentucky.

Elijah Crane's thin, thought-worn features and haggard cheeks bespoke one who had fought, and won, a sore fight against worldly passions and desires, and who in crushing the inward foe, had come close to crushing himself. But from the burning eyes under the craggy, tufted brows flashed a fierce energy, the heritage of the fighting stock from which he was descended.

With lips compressed and clouded brow, he sat his horse stiffly upright, the very genus and impersonation of asceticism. And rife with the opinionativeness and intolerance that too often go hand in hand with asceticism.

Cowhands and ranch owners sighted the wagon train as it rolled westward across the prairie, eyed with decided disfavor, and prepared to repel an unwelcome invasion. But the train moved on across the lush rangeland, apparently headed for the cattle and mining town of Maley.

The sun was high in the sky when the train halted on a level spot on the banks of a stream and about a mile east of Maley. The emigrants at once set about making camp. Van Worthington and Elijah Crane continued on to town.

An hour or so later, Sheriff "Chuck" Lawlor, a fresh-faced, broad-shouldered and tall young fellow, hurriedly entered Jacob Green's big general store. Jacob Green rose from his desk to greet him.

Jacob Green was a rather small man, but wiry of figure. The hair sweeping back in a glorious crinkly mane from his big dome-shaped forehead was white. Nearly white, also, was his short beard. His kindly face was deeply lined. But the brightness of his twinkling brown eyes, the spring of his step, and the swing of his stride showed that he had far from lost the fire and activity of his youth.

Jacob Green had wandered over the world in search of that which was to his kind more precious than life itself—freedom of thought and expression, and the privilege of self-government. He had been a soldier, sailor, miner, cowhand, and one of the famous Sieber's scouts. Here in this wide land of great distances and rugged beauty he had found his place.

"Uncle Jake," Lawlor began without preamble, "I got trouble on my hands again."

Jacob Green chuckled. "You usually have, Chuck," he replied. "What's bothering you now?"

"There's a big covered wagon train pulled in on the flat east of town," Lawlor explained. "The feller in charge—name's Worthington—rode in and talked with me. He seems a right hombre. Them folks are from Kentucky. They settled over in the Nueces country last year, but it was so tarnal hot and dry they couldn't do no good. They're farmers, yuh see. They decided to pull up and head west, lookin' for a place to settle, but so far they ain't had no luck. Yuh know how the cowmen are about nesters. There ain't no place for 'em here, as yuh know. I hate to see folks up against it like that, but what in blazes can we do about 'em?"

Jacob Green stroked his beard, his eyes reminiscent. For a moment he stood in thought.

"Suppose we ride out and have a talk with them," he suggested at length.

When Lawlor and Green reached the camp and dismounted, Van Worthington and Elijah Crane strode forward to greet them. Lawlor performed the introductions.

"Folks hereabouts have a habit of comin' to Uncle Jake when they need help or advice," he explained. "He's mighty good at lendin' a helpin' hand when it's needed, and he's got plenty of wrinkles on his horns. Uh-huh, he's right there with the savvy. I had a notion he might be able to give you folks a lift somehow or other."

"We need one," Worthington replied. "All we ask is a place to settle down, build homes and grow crops. We're will-

in' to work hard and put up with plenty, if we can just get a chance to do for ourselves."

JACOB GREEN nodded, and stroked his grizzled beard.

"When I was scouting for Sieber, some years back," he said, "I hit on a place down in the Bend that I figured was mighty fine. It's a hidden valley, walled around by hills, and almighty rough country. But there's a passable way for a trail to a railroad town some thirty or forty miles to the north.

"It's a plumb wonderful section of land, well-watered, plenty of trees, good grass. The soil is almighty rich and should grow most anything prime. I couldn't help feeling at the time that it was a plumb pity for such fine land to be going to waste. It's something over a hundred miles southwest from here, part of the way is across Apache country, but I can't see why a strong train like this one couldn't get through."

"It sounds good to me," said Worthington, "but how are we to find the place?"

"Well," said Jacob Green, with a twinkle of his deep-set eyes, "I been having a spell of itchy feet of late. If you'll sort of keep an eye on the store and the boys while I'm gone, Chuck, I'll guide these folks to that valley."

"That sure is fine of you," exclaimed Worthington. "What do you think, Reverend Crane?"

Elijah Crane had been scrutinizing Jacob Green with a discerning eye. Now he regarded him with scant favor.

"I think, Brother Worthington," he said in his deep and resonant voice, "that it is a most questionable step. This man, I am sure, is not of our Faith."

Sheriff Lawlor let out a roar of anger.

"Why, yuh dad-gummed ungrateful old horned toad!" he bawled. "Uncle Jake is the finest feller what ever spit on the soil! He ain't as young as he used to be, and here he offers to guide you jiggers across a hundred miles and more of hostile Injun country just to do yuh a favor, and yuh say a thing like that! Why, for half a peso, I'd bust yuh wide open!"

Jacob Green laid a hand on his wrathful friend's arm. "Easy, Chuck, easy," he interrupted. "Nothing is ever gained by anger and violence."

Van Worthington turned to Elijah Crane. His face was stern.

Jacob Green

"Reverend," he said, "you are the shepherd of your flock, but I'm in charge of this shebang, and what I say goes. I say we'll accept this gent's offer, and gladly, if he's still disposed to make it."

"My offer still stands," said Jacob Green.

"Then us folks will take it, and much obliged," said Worthington, stretching out his hand.

Elijah Crane regarded them from under his craggy brows. "'He who sups with Satan needs a long-handled spoon,'" he observed sententiously, and walked away.

Jacob Green watched him go, his eyes all kindness. "A strong man," he remarked, "a 'starn and jealous man' as a Scotchman friend of mine once said Aye! *Stark.* Arrogant, narrow, perhaps, but a stout stick to lean on in time of trouble. We shall need him."

Sheriff Lawlor looked decidedly unconvinced, but said nothing more. . . .

For three days the wagon train made slow but uneventful progress across the broken country southwest of Maley. Jacob Green, in fringed buckskins,

heavy six-guns in the holsters sagging from his double cartridge belts, Winchester in the crook of his arm, rode at the head of the column. He bestrode a lean and powerful roan as hard and wiry and border-wise as himself.

Beside him rode Van Worthington and Elijah Crane. Worthington chatted and joked with the former scout. Crane limited his conversation to the barest necessities of intercourse. The taciturn men of the wagon train, the worn, weary women, and the children had all immediately taken to Uncle Jake, as everybody called him, but the grim old preacher still held aloof.

On the evening of the third day they made camp on a broad, low mesa, from which they looked forth over a vast sweep of country.

"There'd ought to be some place for us in all this," Worthington remarked wistfully.

" 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests,' " Jacob Green quoted softly.

Elijah Crane instantly completed the quotation, " 'But the son of man hath not where to lay his head!' "

"Yes," countered Jacob Green, "the founder of your Faith said that, but he also said, " 'If then God so clothe the grass, which is today in the field, and tomorrow is cast into the oven, shall He not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith?' "

Elijah Crane rubbed his long blue chin, and said nothing.

THE following morning, Jacob Green altered the disposition of the wagon train. He drew the wains up close together in single file marching order, with outriders on either side and in front. He also had all buckets and pans and barrels filled with water.

"We're heading into Apache country now and can't take any chances," he warned Worthington. "Remember, if you are attacked, form the wagons in a circle and fight from within the circle. Don't let them get close or they'll shoot fire arrows and fire the canvas. Be ready with the water in case an arrow does get through. If the wagons are burned you're lost."

Satisfied that everything was as it should be, he mounted his horse.

"I'm riding on ahead now to scout," he said. "I'll keep several miles in front of the train. If any Indians are about, I may be able to spot them before they get a line on the train."

He was tightening his grip on the bridle when Elijah Crane reined up beside him.

"It is the post of danger," said Crane. "I ride with you."

Jacob Green gave him a keen glance, hesitated. "It's no chore for anybody not used to the work," he replied. "I appreciate your offer, Crane, but chances are I'll do better alone."

"Listen," said Crane, "I was born and brought up in the Kentucky mountains. I know the hills and the woods. I've stalked game plenty. And men, too," he added grimly. "My folks were feudists."

A smile twitched the corners of Jacob Green's mouth. "All right," he agreed. "We ride together."

Jacob Green gave Worthington minute instructions as to the course he should follow. Then he and Crane rode off swiftly until they were far in advance of the wagons.

All day long they rode side by side, saying little, carefully observing the movements of birds and little animals, probing thickets and ridges with keen eyes, constantly scanning the horizon for signs of smoke. Toward evening they halted on the bank of a little stream till the wagons came up. That night the camp was watchfully guarded.

The following morning, Green and Crane rode in advance again. The former Sieber scout was even more alert than the day before. For now he felt sure they were in the heart of the Apache country.

He and Crane had paused for a moment behind a litter of boulders near a thicket to breathe their horses. Suddenly Jacob Green uttered a sharp exclamation.

Shimmering darkly in the sun, a slender column of smoke had soared up from the crest of a distant hill. It broke from its base, floated away into the blue of the sky. A rolling puff soared upward, was followed by a second streamer.

"What is it?" asked Crane.

"Smoke signals—Indian talk," Jacob Green answered. "One bunch talking to another somewhere in the distance. They use a sort of telegraph code. The streaks correspond to dashes, the puffs to dots."

"What are they talking about?"

"That's what I'd like to know," Jacob Green returned grimly. "About you and me, perhaps. They may have spotted us. They have eyes that can see through tree trunks and around bits of mountain. And they may have spotted the train. . . . Look, there's an answer going up to the south."

"What shall we do?" asked Crane.

"Wait," Jacob Green decided. "It may have nothing to do with us, after all. Wait, and see what happens. If we don't see anything in the next hour or so, we'll hightail back to the train. But we want to make sure they are not between it and us."

Elijah Crane nodded, still eyeing the distant smoke. "They don't seem to care who may see it," he remarked.

"Yes, I've thought of that," Jacob Green replied. "What's worrying me is that they may *want* us to see it."

"Why?"

"To distract our attention. I wish those brush-covered ridges weren't so close. I think we'd better hole up our horses in that thicket over to the left. These rocks here will give us some protection, but they don't hide the horses."

They tethered the horses in the dense growth, then returned to their post of observation. The smoke signals had ceased. The sky shone stainless blue. Nowhere could they see signs of movement. The hour passed slowly.

Jacob Green kept watching the nearby brush-covered ridge. He wished he could get a glimpse down the far side of the sag. He made up his mind to risk a quick move across the open. Suddenly he hurled himself against Crane, with a shout of warning.

FROM the ridge crest wisped smoke. The clang of a rifle rang loud in the silence. Elijah Crane threw up his hands, reeled, and flopped to the ground behind a boulder.

Jacob Green threw his Winchester forward, snapped a shot at the smoke puff and hurled himself down. The growth topping the ridge was violently agitated. A dark figure plunged over the lip, rolled down the slope a little ways and lay still.

"Got one of the hellions!" Jacob Green exulted. "Wonder if they did for poor Crane."

A moment later, however, he was reassured on that point. Behind him, Elijah Crane was grunting and sputtering. Green did not dare take his eyes off the ridge. He breathed an anxious whisper over his shoulder.

"Just burned my head with a slug, thanks to you," Crane replied. "How'd you spot him?"

"Saw the sun glint on his rifle barrel when he shifted it to take aim," Jacob Green whispered answer. "Keep down, and don't do any shooting. Let 'em think they got one of us. It may help. We are on a tough spot."

Rifles were cracking back of the ledge. Bullets chipped fragments from the boulders, ricocheted and whined off into space. Jacob Green cast an anxious glance to right and left. If the Indians managed to surround them, they were done. However the ridge extended a considerable ways north and south, with open ground before it.

"But if they hold us here till dark, we're done," he muttered to himself.

He began counting the shots that were fired almost in volleys.

"Don't think there are more than four of 'em over there," he told Crane. "I got a notion how we can outfox 'em. Chances are they feel sure they did for one of us. I'll make a quick dash for the thicket and the horses. Likely they'll try to rush me. Then you can down 'em when they break cover."

"No," countered Crane. "I'll make the dash. I've got long legs and I'm a mighty fast runner. You're the better and faster shot."

Before Jacob Green could object, he was on his feet and scudding across the open space, ducking and dodging.

From the ridge rose a chorus of screeches and a banging of rifles. Bullets whipped about Crane, whirled his hat from his head, ripped the sleeve of his coat, but he ran on. Had the Indians taken careful aim they could hardly have missed him, but they fired wildly in their excitement. Crane was halfway to the thicket when there was a crashing in the brush and four yelling figures leaped into view and raced down the slope.

Jacob Green dropped his Winchester, whipped his sixes from their holsters and leaped to his feet. The big Colts let go with a rattling crash.

Two of the Indians went down, to lie like bundles of old clothes. Jacob Green fired again and again. A third Apache fell. Then the hammers of Green's guns

clicked on empty shells.

Elijah Crane whirled around as Jacob Green dived for his Winchester. The charging Apache gave a yell and fired his rifle. But Crane stood rock-still and took careful aim. His Winchester boomed. The Indian went heels over head like a plugged rabbit. Crane let out an exultant whoop and ran to rejoin Jacob Green, who was scanning the silent ridge crest.

"Reckon that's all of 'em," he told Crane as the preacher came panting up to the rocks. "Let's have a look at the bodies. Wait a minute." He stood staring at the motionless forms, rifle ready. "They're dead, all right," he said at length.

"How you know for sure?" Crane asked.

"Sun's shining hot on them, and they're not sweating," Jacob Green replied. "Can't take any chances with 'em, though. A wounded Apache is about as safe to deal with as a busted-back rattler. Let's go."

He carefully examined the dead Indians, taking particular note of their dirty and greasy garments.

"Chiricahua Apaches," was his verdict. "The worst of all the Apache tribes. The Chirics don't often get this far east. A small raiding band from over New Mexico way, I'd say." He stared at the horizon, a worried look on his face. "I'm bothered about the wagon train," he told Crane. "I'm just about sure this bunch didn't have anything to do with those smoke signals. Reckon we'd better backtrack."

WITH a final glance at the dead Indians, they retrieved their horses and rode swiftly eastward. As they topped ridge after ridge without sighting the wagons, Jacob Green grew more worried.

"I don't like it," he told Crane. "The train ought to have been in sight before now."

Crane suddenly held up his hand. "Listen!" he exclaimed.

Jacob Green heard it too, a faint crackling, like thorns burning briskly under a pot.

"Rifles!" he barked. "They're raiding the train! Let's go!"

At top speed they rode, urging their straining horses to greater efforts. The sound of rifle fire grew louder. Faint whoops and screeches came to their ears. They toiled up a long slope, the crest of which was grown with tall brush.

"E a s y!" Jacob Green cautioned. "Guns are sounding mighty loud. I've a notion they're just the other side of the sag."

They topped the rise, eased their horses to a swift walk, slowed them still more as they reached the final fringe of growth. Cautiously they peered forth, the din of rifle fire and the fiendish yelling loud in their ears.

At the foot of the low rise, and less than three hundred yards distant, the wagons were drawn together in a rough circle. And around the train swooped and raced nearly a hundred painted savages. Leaning low in their saddles, shielded by the necks of their horses, they fired their rifles and uttered their blood-curdling yells. Answering shots smoked and flamed between the spokes of the wagon wheels. Several sprawled forms on the grass testified to the accuracy of the defenders' fire.

From the circling ranks of the braves whizzed a flaming arrow. Another and another. One quivered in the canvas top of a wagon. A flicker almost instantly became a spreading flame. Then water was dashed upward inside the wagon. The fire hissed out in a whortle of smoke. But now another wagon was blazing. And the fire arrows were whizzing in a shower.

Jacob Green and Crane flung themselves from their saddles, sliding their Winchesters from the boots in the same movement. Side by side they stood, legs apart, feet planted firmly. Smoke spurted from the rock-steady muzzles.

Jacob Green shot in true Texas style, the lever of his rifle a flickering blur as it ejected the spent shells. Elijah Crane was Kentucky mountaineer. He took steady aim, fired slowly, but with methodical sureness.

Two Apaches whirled from their saddles. Another and another. Still another howled with pain and clutched at his blood-spouting shoulder. The rifles roared and two more Indians went down.

That was enough, and too much, for the Apaches. Thrown into confusion by the unexpectedness of the attack and the appalling accuracy of the two rifles, they yelled in panic, whirled their horses, and raced away from the train. The defenders of the wagons raised a roar of tri-

umph and fired the faster.

Green and Crane sent final shots after the fleeing savages, with the result that two more dropped from their saddles before the band was out of rifle range. Bending low on their racing ponies, the survivors vanished into the growth far to the south.

Green and Crane mounted and charged down the slope. The farmers were streaming from their shelter, shouting greetings. The fired canvas had been drenched to a steaming smolder.

"Anybody hurt?" Jacob Green shouted above the turmoil.

"We lost two of the boys who were outridin'," a voice answered. "Cart Blaine has a busted shoulder. Jasper Mason's got a hole in his leg."

"Bad enough," Green muttered, "but it could have been worse."

"May the Lord receive the souls of His servants," prayed Elijah Crane.

Van Worthington was coming forward. His shoulders drooped, his face was white and haggard. He seemed to have aged twenty years since Jacob Green had last seen him, only a few hours before.

"You hurt, Van?" he asked anxiously.

Worthington shook his head. "No," he said dully, "but I wish I was dead. They got little Tom."

"What!"

"That's right, they got him. He was ridin' his pony over there with Russell and Wagner, the outriders. I hadn't ought to have let him go, I reckon. When the hellions downed Wagner and Russell, one swooped Tom out of his saddle and made off with him. The rest headed for the wagons."

JACOB GREEN'S lips tightened to a thin line. His usually kindly eyes were as hard as bits of obsidian. He remembered the child well. Little Tom was a yellow-haired, blue-eyed youngster of between six and seven years, a prime favorite with everybody. He was Worthington's only child, and his mother was dead.

Jacob Green stood thinking for a moment. "I don't figure they'll kill him, Van," he said slowly. "Chances are they'll adopt him into the tribe. The Apaches do things like that—figure it brings them good luck."

"Better he was dead," Worthington replied.

Jacob Green shook his head. "That's wrong," he differed. "As long as he's alive, there's hope for him." He fell silent again, evidently thinking deeply, his gaze steady on the south.

"Van," he said at length, "I've a notion there's a chance to get the boy back. Worth trying anyhow. First, let's have a look at those dead Indians."

A quick scrutiny of the bodies and Green nodded.

"Thought so," he said. "Lipan Apaches—Texas stock. Likely their village is no great ways off. That bunch we downed over west didn't belong to this outfit, Crane, and that's all to the good for us. Yes, I wouldn't be surprised if the Lipan village is somewheres down in that range of hills you can see against the southern skyline. Their trail should be easy to follow."

"You mean to say you're going to foller those devils to their village?" Worthington demanded incredulously.

"Reckon that's about the size of it," Jacob Green replied.

"And I ride with you," Elijah Crane said, with a grim finality that forbade argument.

Green nodded. "But first we've got to make some preparations. Worthington, get the train under way. I spotted a canyon a few miles farther on where you can hole up and wait for us. It's just about impervious to attack, even if those coyotes should come back to trail you, which I don't think they'll do. They suffered pretty heavy losses in this ruckus, and I've an idea they'll stay at home licking their wounds for quite a spell.

"Crane, you hightail back to where we came from and strip off clothes from those dead Chiricahuas that'll fit you and me after a fashion. We can't use the rags from these Lipans. They might be recognized. You and I'll go as Chirics aiming to join up with the Lipans. They do that sometimes. The Lipans are always glad to have them, for the Chiricahuas are the best fighters of all the Apaches."

"You fellers don't look like Injuns," Worthington objected.

"We will before I'm finished," Jacob Green predicted. "Just you wait and see."

Elijah Crane set off on his chore at a fast pace. While the wagon train rolled toward the canyon, Jacob Green ranged the thickets and hollows, searching the

ground with keen eyes. When he rejoined the train, his saddle pouch was stuffed with roots and leaves.

The train made camp in the canyon.

"Light only dry-wood fires, and no more than you absolutely have to," Jacob Green warned Worthington. "Don't let anybody leave this crack till Crane and I get back, or we've been gone so long you're sure we've been done in. Now I want an iron pot half full of water."

Green lighted a fire under the kettle. When the water came to a boil he fed the roots and leaves into the kettle, carefully watching the results. From time to time he stirred the mixture. Finally he removed the pot from the fire and set it aside to cool. By this time Crane had returned with a load of greasy garments taken from the slain Chiricahuas.

"Off with your shirt," Jacob Green directed. He proceeded to rub Crane's face, hair and his sinewy chest and shoulders with the mixture in the pot. Finally he stepped back and surveyed his handiwork. Van Worthington uttered an amazed exclamation.

The result was indeed startling. Crane's grizzled hair was now jet black. His burning black eyes glowed in a dark saturnine face. His high-bridged nose and gaunt cheeks were emphasized by the coloring. All in all he looked as ferocious an Apache as ever rode the plains.

"A trick I learned from the Karankawas down around Matagorda Bay," Jacob Green chuckled. "The Karanks were the herb and poison folks of the Texas Indians."

"How will he ever get it off?" Worthington wondered.

"Water won't touch it, but plenty of soap will remove the stain," Jacob Green replied. "Get me a razor, Van. I've got to shave off my whiskers. Too heavy a beard for an Indian. Glad it doesn't grow fast. I'll be safe for a few days."

"The hellions will spot you as soon as you open your mouths," Worthington warned.

Jacob Green smiled. "I can speak their language," he replied. "And the Chiricahua dialect is rather different from what the Lipans use. I can get by."

"But how about Crane?"

"Crane," Jacob Green said, "is a deaf mute. He has been touched by the hand of *Usen*, the Great Spirit of the Apaches. He will be treated with respect, even reverence, by those superstitious people. Remember, Crane, you hear nothing, and you make only sounds and grunts—no words. You and I converse by means of signs."

AS soon as it was light the following morning, Crane and Jacob Green back-tracked to the scene of yesterday's battle. They wore typical Apache costume—beaded and fringed buckskins, moccasins, necklaces and bracelets, the necklaces of shell, the bracelets of hammered silver. The moccasins had hard rawhide soles and upward curving toes. They had extended uppers to protect the leg. Dingy white turbans, each with a low-slanted eagle feather, completed the costumes.

They left behind their modern rifles and Jacob Green's six-guns, arming themselves with the long knives and the old but serviceable Winchesters of the slain Chiricahuas. They rode their own horses.

"The horses and the riding gear won't matter," Jacob Green pointed out. "Apaches are all great horse thieves and are usually mounted on good critters, with good saddles and bridles. But Crane, we'll be lucky if we come out of this with our hair on our heads."

"We must take our chance," was the grim preacher's only reply.

The trail of the fleeing Apaches led due south and was easy for Jacob Green to follow, for the panicked savages had taken no pains to conceal it. Apparently they had been in too great a hurry to put distance between themselves and the deadly rifles that had taken such terrible toll from their ranks. Later, however, the chore was not so easy, but still not impossible for the former Sieber scout.

Mid-afternoon of the second day out, they sighted the Lipan *ranchería*. It sat in the mouth of a sheltered valley hard to come to and easy of defense. As they approached, a mounted band swooped out of the valley mouth to intercept them. They rode on steadily, pulled up as the band drew near. The leader of the band barked a guttural question. A palaver ensued.

They had left New Mexico in a hurry, because it was healthier for them to do so, Jacob Green explained in the Chiricahua dialect. They dared not go back

to their own village. They were tired of riding alone and wished to join with their friends, the Lipans. They were good fighters and worth their place and meat. His brother was one who had been touched by the hand of *Usen*. He spoke not, neither did he hear.

During the conflab, Elijah Crane sat staring straight ahead and making no sound. The Lipans eyed him somewhat askance, but Green noted that none would directly meet his burning gaze.

The chief consulted with his followers. Finally he nodded his head, raised his hand in salute, and whirled his horse, leaving the recruits to follow at their leisure. They were accepted.

"This is easy," Elijah Crane whispered through motionless lips as they rode on.

"Too darn easy," Jacob Green replied. "I don't like it. They didn't ask us hardly any questions. Wonder if we're being outfoxed. The sooner we do our chore and get away from here, the better I'll like it. My top hair is feeling loose."

Little attention was paid to them as they entered the village, although men and women shot furtive glances at Crane from time to time. Crane, staring straight to the front, took no heed of the sounds going on around him.

When food was offered him, he accepted with a guttural grunt and let his burning glance rest hard on the woman who proffered it. She shrank back and hurried away, making the gesture designed to ward off evil spirits. Jacob Green was filled with admiration of the way the preacher was carrying on. He chuckled in his throat.

"Aye, *stark*," he told himself. "A strong man."

As night approached, Jacob Green built a small fire at a little distance from the others and cooked a meal of corn cakes and antelope meat. Crane, with the privilege of the afflicted, wandered about aimlessly among the oval wickiups made of poles thrust into the ground, drawn together at the top and covered with coarse skins and earth. He saw the women tending small fields of corn and melons, watched the children at play.

As they ate their simple meal, he and Jacob Green apparently conversed by means of gestures, under cover of which they uttered terse whispers.

"Nowhere have I seen a white child," Crane said.

"I've already spotted him," Jacob Green replied. "He is with the chief's squaw. The chief has adopted him. Doubtless he sleeps in the chief's tepee."

"How do you know?" Crane asked eagerly.

"I looked for a child with blue eyes," Jacob Green replied. "I knew they would stain his skin immediately, and dye his hair. That's always the first step when they steal a white child and decide to rear him. That's so he will grow accustomed to seeing nothing in his appearance differing from the other children. He will be kept that way until he begins to grow up and has become an Apache in customs and ways of thought. . . . Careful—some of the hellions are headed this way."

HE and Crane waved their hands, waggled their fingers and munched their food. Crane grunted and gurgled in his throat, shook his head vigorously, nodded from time to time.

Apaches in twos and threes drifted past the little fire. They seemed curious and cast quick furtive glances toward the pair, muttering in low tones.

Jacob Green did not like it. Of course, the curiosity might only be directed toward the Chiricahua brave touched by the hand of *Usen*, but still it gave him an uncomfortable feeling. The Apaches might be suspicious and studying them. For the moment, they were safe, but the slightest slip could easily be their undoing. He decided on the boldest possible course.

"The longer we stay here, the least chance we'll have," he whispered to Crane as the Apaches drifted away. "It's tonight or never. The boy sleeps in the chief's wickiup. It's right over there to the left—the big one with the pictures painted on the walls. I'm beginning to have a mighty bad feeling that these hellions suspect a blotted brand. If they do, they'll catch on sooner or later. When the false dawn walks the sky we'll move. Apaches sleep soundest then, and they're scared of the night then. They think the spirits of the dead are abroad in the dark hours just before it is light."

Apparently paying no attention to what went on around them, they rolled up in their blankets and simulated sleep. Their horses were hobbled close by, their saddles formed their pillows.

Jacob Green, in fact, did sleep for sev-

eral hours, for he had the ability to go to sleep at any time and under any circumstances, and he appreciated to the full the value of rest. But Elijah Crane was still awake when the scout awakened noiselessly in the black hour that preceded the dawn.

In utter silence they got the rigs on their horses. There was no sound from the village. The warriors, full-fed and secure in their hidden stronghold, slept sound.

No thread of smoke drifted from the top of the chief's wickiup, but the still live coals in the firehole gave off a faint glow.

That glow was enough for the lynx eyes of the former Sieber scout. He made out the form of the chief and that of his squaw, wrapped in their blankets. On the far side of the wickiup was a smaller bundle, also wrapped in a blanket. Jacob Green glided into the wickiup, gathered the sleeping child in his arms and drifted out to where Elijah Crane hovered beside the pinned-back flaps of the wickiup door, long knife in hand.

And at that instant little Tom awoke with a start, saw the dark face bending over him, and screamed his fright.

The chief awoke with a yell. Instantly other yells sounded, and a thudding of naked feet.

"To the horses!" roared Jacob Green.

Elijah Crane, with his long legs, reached them first. He slashed the hobbles, flung himself into the saddle.

Jacob Green, shielding the shrieking child in his arm, charged after him. He tripped over a wickiup rope and sprawled headlong, protecting the child with his own body. The breath was all but knocked out of him. For a moment he floundered helplessly, then surged to his feet.

But now the Indians were boiling from the wickiups, screeching, whooping. They were between Green and the horses. Hoofs crashed through the graying light. The mounted form of Elijah Crane loomed grotesque and gigantic.

"Catch!" Jacob Green yelled.

Over the heads of the Apaches he hurled the blanketed child, straight into Elijah Crane's reaching arms.

"Hightail, Crane, hightail!" Green shouted.

Elijah Crane whirled his horse. The maddened animal charged forward, hurling the Indians from his path. His hoofs drummed out of the valley.

The Apaches closed around Jacob Green. He whipped his long knife from its sheath and struck out with all his strength. A scream of agony followed the slash of the gleaming blade. Again he struck, and again. Steel flickered around him. His garments were slashed and rent. He lashed out with his left fist, felt his knuckles jar against bone and flesh. The long knife went home again. Then he went down under an avalanche of bodies.

Hands clutched him. Fists battered him. The knives flickered hungrily. Then a rifle butt thudded on his skull and he stiffened and lay still.

THE chief roared an order. The blood-mad braves stayed their steel. Suddenly one uttered an astounded screech. He pointed to where a knife stroke had slit Green's greasy breeches from knee to thigh. Through the rent gleamed white flesh. The brave sprang forward, whirling up his knife, but the chief caught his descending wrist and bellowed an order.

Jacob Green, still unconscious, was securely bound and thrust into a wickiup. With the raging chief at their head, the warriors thundered out of the valley in pursuit of the fugitive and the recovered captive.

The shock of cold water on his face revived Jacob Green. A squaw, basin in hand, was vigorously scrubbing his face with the suds of soapweed. She grunted exultantly as the white flesh showed.

Jacob Green tried to move, but his hands and ankles were tightly wrapped with rawhide thongs. He relaxed, grimly endured the splitting ache in his head and the burn of numerous slight flesh wounds. He fervently wished one of the knife slashes was deep enough to bleed him to death. He suffered no illusions as to what was in store for him.

The squaw finished her chore and left the wickiup, leaving Green alone with his thoughts, which were far from pleasant. During the hours that passed the village was silent save for the chattering of the squaws.

"All the warriors are out after Crane," Jacob Green reasoned. "But they won't catch him. That big dun of his is one of the fastest horses I ever clapped eyes on, and Crane is smart to the woods and the hills. He'll cover his

trail. And even if they keep on following him, he'll make it to the canyon, and if the hellions try to rush that, they'll get their hottest reception yet."

But when the Apaches came clattering back to the village, Green knew, from the time that had elapsed, that they had either overhauled Crane or had given up the chase long before Crane reached the canyon. He quickly decided, from the disgruntled voices of the warriors, that they had failed in the chase. He exulted over that. After all, his coming death by torture would not be in vain.

A little later the closed flaps of the wickiup were drawn aside. Green saw that darkness had fallen. Squaws entered, bringing food and drink. His bonds were loosened, his wounds dressed. He understood perfectly the reason for the ministrations.

"Figure to have me in good shape tomorrow for the big show," he told himself grimly. "A half-dead man goes under too quick and doesn't suffer enough."

Jacob Green slept fitfully during the night, for the thought of what the morrow would bring was not easy on even his nerves. He was glad to see the light of dawn, doubtless the last dawn he would see in this world.

"The quicker it's over, the better," he told himself. "Anything's better than lying here thinking of what's to come."

The sun was well up in the sky when they hauled him from the wickiup. The entire tribe was clustered about a flat, open space near the mouth of the valley. Beyond, the trail writhed in a gray ribbon between clumps of thicket.

Swiftly the braves got to work. Jacob Green's bonds were slashed. Then he was spread-eagled on his back, hands and wrists fettered to pegs driven deep in the earth. A band across his forehead held his head motionless. Utterly helpless he lay with the fierce glare of the sun beating down on his face.

A forked stick was brought forward, driven into the earth beside the victim's head. In the fork was hung a large earthen jar. Jacob Green could see a small hole in the bottom of the jar. The hole was directly in line with his forehead below the restricting band.

A squaw appeared bearing another earthen container. From it she filled the suspended jar to the brim with water. And Jacob Green understood!

The water torture! The most fiendish torment known to the Apaches, or to any other people, that drives the strongest man to shrieking, babbling insanity. Slow drop by drop the water would fall upon the unprotected flesh, until nerves were a raw and quivering agony, until the screaming victim was wholly mad and prayed for death to relieve his suffering.

The Apaches gathered close, eager, expectant, their fierce eyes glowing in their dark faces.

DROP by drop the water fell. At first it was nothing, then it became an irritation, then nerves tightened with dread expectancy, to flinch as the awaited drop descended. Jacob Green set his teeth, stiffened his body. In an unbelievably short time his whole being was a sweat-bathed agony.

But still he grimly held on to his reason, and no moan of pain passed his tight lips.

The Apaches began to grow restless. They muttered among themselves. This was not so good. The victim possessed a stamina greater than they had expected. The show was proving dull.

Finally the chief barked an order. A warrior came forward, bearing a bundle of dry sticks. These he heaped over the victim's feet and ankles, careful not to interfere with the damp rawhide thongs that bound him. Jacob Green set his jaw harder.

The brave knelt beside the tinder-dry wood with flint and steel. He struck a shower of sparks. One lighted on a bit of shredded bark. It became a glow. A tiny spiral of smoke ascended. The Apaches grunted in anticipation, and the chief stepped closer, glowering vindictive hatred.

Crash!

The chief leaped from the ground with a bubbling shriek. He clutched madly at the air, as if seeking to grasp his escaping soul, and plunged headlong. A roar of rifle fire rocked the hills. A half-dozen Indians went down, kicking and clawing. Again the rifles roared, and more fell. The survivors, screeching and yowling, fled wildly for the protection of the wooded slopes.

From the thickets beside the trail burst the Kentucky wagoneers, rifles flaming. At their head was Elijah Crane, firing coolly and methodically as usual.

He raced to where Jacob Green lay, kicked aside the burning fagots, freed him with a few strokes of his knife and hauled him to his feet. His followers were industriously browning the slopes with bullets.

Jacob Green leaned on Crane's shoulder a moment. He glanced around. Not an Indian was in sight, save for the far from small number that lay motionless, or writhing in the glare of the sun.

"Back out of here!" he told Crane. "If any of them packed their guns along, they'll be taking pot shots at us from cover of the brush. Let's go!"

Crane shouted orders to the others. Still firing, they retreated to the shelter of the thickets. From the slopes sounded the yowlings of the hidden Apaches.

"The horses are back a little ways," said Crane. "To the saddles, brothers! We've finished our chore."

As they rode swiftly from the valley, Elijah Crane leaned over and gripped Jacob Green's hand. There were tears in his black eyes, and for the first time Jacob Green saw him smile.

"Brother," he said, his voice quivering with emotion, "I was afraid we had lost you. Praise the Lord for His mercies!"

Westward the wagons rolled. The Apache country lay behind them. Before them stretched the wildly rugged, weirdly beautiful country of the lower Big Bend. Turquoise and amethyst, the mountains rose, their cliffs banded with scarlet, russet and marbled white. The gray of the sage and the mesquite was splashed with emerald and jade. White yuccas swayed in the wind like swung censers. Green and yellow mescal plants soared thirty feet in the air to explode in starry white booms. The graceful wands of ocotillas rose like the jets of fairy fountains.

Ahead the hills drew closer together. The wagons rumbled between encroaching cliffs that echoed back hollowly the sound of their passing. The somber black walls towered high on either side.

Then abruptly they fell away, and the weary emigrants viewed their Promised Land!

A wide valley, walled by mountains that to the south were misty with distance. A valley whose garment of green the streams edged with silver. Thickets and groves dotted the broad expanse. The grass that grew between was withers-high on a tall horse. Overhead the sky was stainless blue. The valley shimmered in golden sunshine. Van Worthington's eyes kindled as he gazed.

"She's a beauty," he said to Jacob Green. "Worth comin' a long way for, worth fightin' for, worth sufferin' for!"

Onward the wagons rolled, seeking to make camp on the banks of a stream some miles down the valley. Near the course of the stream rose a tall mound with gently sloping sides. Its crest was apparently naked rock.

Elijah Crane gazed at the majestic hill as the wagons halted by the stream and the horsemen dismounted. His eyes burned, a smile touched his thin lips. He turned to face his people.

"Come!" he shouted, leading the way up the gentle slope. "Come!"

On the stony summit he halted, his followers clustering around him. His voice rose in thunder:

" 'On this rock I will build my Church, and all the fires of hell shall not prevail against it!' Aye, Brother Green, here will we build a church. We'll build it strong and we'll build it tight. A church to which all men may come to worship God as they know Him in their hearts. We'll build a tower, strong and tall, that will guide men, as a beacon, from afar. And on that tower shall stand, in brotherhood, the Star of David, and the Cross of Christ!"

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THE GREAT ST. JOSEPH MANHUNT

ACCORDING to old timers, when a $10,000 award was posted for Jesse James almost the entire town of St. Joseph, Missouri, organized to seek out the bandit. For their leader the posse naturally selected the town's leading citizen.

Every man in the party was handed a circular with a carefully worded description of the sought man. Though the party, ably and enthusiastically led by the foremost townsmen, searched diligently for days, they never found the bandit. And it was only years later that they learned that the man who had led their posse was Jesse James.

Simpson M. Ritter

by FREDERICK R. BECHDOLT

An exciting true story of the valiant Lone Star pioneers who wrote history in powdersmoke!

the TEXANS

SOONER or later, if you listen to the tales of the old-timers, a fact is going to impress itself upon you. Throughout the West, wherever there was much fighting, there were Texans.

With only a few exceptions that rule held good from the Yellowstone to the Rio Grande. No matter what the conflict, range-war or mining-feud or battle with the Indians, the smell of burning powder seemed to draw these men, and they were never satisfied until they were right in the thick of it.

There were men of Texas on both sides throughout the Lincoln County wars: Panhandle boys helped Pat Garret to capture Billy the Kid. During Dodge City's wildest days the redoubtable Bat Masterson ruled the camp with an iron hand. In Abilene, Wild Bill Hickok

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fought several of his grimmest battles against riders who had come northward with trail-herds from the Rio Grande.

List of Texans Is Long

While Tombstone boomed, John Ringo and Curley Bill, who had served their apprenticeships during cattle-wars in the Lone Star State, led the outlaws; and John Slaughter, the sheriff who eventually brought law and order into Cochise County, came from Maverick County. One could go on at length in this manner and enumerate most of the noteworthy struggles on the frontier.

What caused this breed? One must delve into obscure volumes to get an idea of the long list of struggles which filtered out the cowards and left this brave strain.

To outline that history ever so briefly from the time when Moses Austin brought the first colonists to the Brazos River on through the early Indian wars, the bitter border fighting against Mexico when Texas was a nation, the succeeding periods of Comanche raiding and range vendettas, would demand a thick volume. During those fifty years there was always a frontier, a thin line of cabins. The men who owned these cabins carried firearms because they had to; the rifle was as much a part of one's daily life as the clothes which he wore.

Peril Becomes Commonplace

To face death became an incident, a part of life's routine. Men took it calmly and remembered to pull down their sights while the enemy's lead was snarling past their ears, which was usually very bad for those who had come forth to kill them.

Away back in the days of the early settlements the sires of this fighting stock became hardened to deadly combat and lost diffidence for Death.

Of this breed was Ad Lawrence, who dwelt on the east bank of the Trinity River in 1832. He was a daring rider and a lover of horses; so he made a business of catching wild mustangs and breaking them, thus making a good living, since every settler needed ponies.

The Comanches were beginning to make their first forays along the Trinity in the summer of 1832.

Lawrence Seeks Horses

One morning Lawrence rode forth with three companions to seek wild ponies on the prairies west of the Trinity. Lawrence was mounted on a black mare.

Beyond the Trinity lay the land of the Comanches. Ten miles across the rolling prairie. The four men caught sight of a band of mustangs. As they neared the mustangs, the Comanches who owned those ponies sprang from the deep grass where the herd was grazing, and gave chase.

One hundred mustangs, each bearing a bronzed warrior!

The white men whirled their horses in full flight. They leaned low in their saddles and raced their horses to keep beyond arrow-range. So for three miles. Then they saw the trap into which their pursuers were driving them.

A quarter of a mile or so ahead of them a steep-banked gully cut straight athwart their course. To cross it faster than at a walk would be impossible. There was only one chance, to go around it by the head.

Now Lawrence and his companions turned toward that goal. The black mare's hoofs barely touched the earth, she ran so lightly.

Desperate Race Begins

It was a short dash, less than a half mile at the outside. The Indians were quirting their ponies to the last high pitch of endeavor. Ad Lawrence saw them crowding down upon him—and then the brief vision passed behind. A cloud of arrows came droning. He glanced back to see how his companions had fared. Their horses were running riderless across the prairie.

He settled down for the longer race that lay before him; seven miles to the river and the cabins of the settlers. He eased the mare to a slower stride. An arrow had lodged in her neck just in front of the withers.

The Comanches had tarried to finish their three victims. In the third mile from the coulée's head he glanced behind once more to find a solitary rider gaining fast upon him.

The mare was breathing heavily. The blood from the arrow-wound was spreading downward, staining her shoulder and the fore leg.

"Old girl," he said, "I'm going to let you get your wind." His rifle was gone—he had only his bowie-knife.

Mare Gets Rest

He pulled up, swung from the saddle, loosed the cinch, and turned to face his enemy.

The savage was a young buck, resplendent in the war-path's panoply. He drew his pony up on its haunches and leaped from its back, his long knife in hand. His arm rose, the knife-blade glistening in the hot sunshine.

In the instant while the blow hung poised, Ad Lawrence sprang under the upflung arm and sank his own knife hilt-deep into the naked body. Then he came back to the mare, tightened the cinch again, kicked off his heavy boots, and leaped upon her back. She tore through the thickets, giving the last of the strength that was in her, and reached the river's brink.

The bank was more than fifteen feet high and dropped off sheer. No one in Texas had ever made a leap like that, but Lawrence did. The stream ran deep. Ad Lawrence finally rose to the surface. A swarm of arrows buzzed past them. He felt the mare go limp beneath him. She uttered a deep groan and sank like lead.

Lawrence Praises Mare

Ad Lawrence swam to the eastern bank and made his way afoot to the cabin of the nearest settler.

When he was an old man, he used to tell the story of that escape, and when he came to the black mare's death his voice would always break . . .

Not far from the town of Belton there is a place called Taylor's Valley.

Here near the three forks of Little River, Joseph Taylor settled with his family during the early 'Thirties and built a double cabin. The structure was really two log buildings, with an interval between and one roof covering the whole.

On a November night in 1835 a dozen or fifteen Indians stole in upon the clearing. They were in the brush down near the barn when the dog got wind of them and set up a loud barking. The noise awakened Taylor and his wife. The man leaped from his bed and ran to a window, glimpsed several Indians.

Two daughters grown to womanhood were sleeping in this half of the house; two boys, the eldest thirteen and the other twelve, were in the other cabin. The mother ran to the door and threw it open, calling her sons. The Indians opened fire upon her. Arrows and bullets rattled on the green logs around the woman, but she stuck to her post until the youngsters came, slammed the door shut behind them, and dragged a heavy table against it.

The cabin was newly built, and all the chinking was not yet completed. Over the door there was an aperture of several inches. Mrs. Taylor posted her twelve-year-old upon the table with a rifle.

The elder boy took one window and his father another. The two girls had a fire going and went to work molding bullets on the hearthstone.

Father Kills Indians

The noise in the thickets had died away now. For a long time there was no sound without; no form showed. Then the small boy on the table-top got sight of something stirring between the house and barn. The rifle was longer than himself, but the top of the door made a good rest. He pressed his cheek against the walnut stock and lined his sights as carefully. The weapon's sharp report brought his mother running to the table.

After waiting for the smoke to clear away, he turned to announce that he had got his first Indian.

Within a minute Taylor slew another warrior. The uproar began again. Three or four Indians leaped out into the open. The thirteen-year-old son wounded one, and the forms of the others vanished.

Meantime the rest of the band had managed to steal up to the other end of the house, and within a few minutes a red light rose and spread until the whole clearing was as bright as day. Taylor turned to his wife.

"Do you take the two girls," he said. "The boys and I will keep them busy with our rifles while you make for the brush. There's a chance that you can slip away and save yourselves."

But she shook her head. "We'd better die here than run the risk of being captured," she told him. "I'm going to put that fire out."

There was a barrel of home-made vinegar in the room. She bade the girls bring a half-dozen filled milk-pans to her. Leaping to the top of the table, she broke away the shakes above her. The logs were green. The fire had not yet spread to them. But the roof of the other cabin was ablaze. She thrust her head and shoulders through the hole, taking the ladles and buckets that her daughters passed up to her. The breath of the flames was hot in her face but at last the fire was extinguished. She crept out on the roof and followed it until there remained not a single spark.

Hostiles Give Up

That was the last of the attack. The Indians had given it up for a bad job and stolen away. The family waited for two hours. Then they made their way afoot more than ten miles to the cabin of the nearest neighbor.

In 1836, when Texas was fighting for her independence, the border tribes took advantage of the absence of men from many home, and there was Indian warfare all along the frontier. Boys in their 'teens became seasoned veterans.

There was one of these young fellows by the name of Evan Faulkenberry, who stood beside his father at the Parker's Fort massacre and helped to hold off the Comanches while the other survivors of that bloody affair were escaping. A year later, on the west bank of the Trinity, this same boy died, as bravely as one of Homer's old heroes.

Party Is Attacked

There were four of them resting at noontime near the stream: the elder Faulkenberry, young Abram Anglin, a man by the name of Anderson, and the boy Evan. Sixty Comanches stole upon them under cover of the brush. The two men were fatally wounded at the first volley; but they leaped into the stream and swam across. The next day a relief party found their bodies on the opposite bank.

The boys had managed to seize their rifles at the first alarm. They got behind trees and made so hot a fight of it that the Indians hung back for several minutes. Then the savages made a rush. Young Anglin ran from tree to tree until he gained the bank. He dropped into the Trinity and swam to safety.

But the Comanches had surrounded Evan Faulkenberry. They struck him down. He bounded to his feet.

Before they could lay hands on him again he brained two of them with his clubbed rifle. One, who had slipped up behind him, felled him, and a dozen hurled themselves upon his prostrate form. A warrior bent over him with bared knife and started to tear away the scalp. The boy sprang from under him, burst through the pack, and ran to the river. He struck out for the other bank but when he reached the middle of the stream he sank from sight.

The Comanches were old men when they told the story. But they said to those who listened that they had never seen a warrior die so bravely as that lad did.

Texas Rangers Are Organized

It was during this period, while the young nation was fighting for its life against invading Mexican armies, that the Texas Rangers were organized. Their duty was to defend the border settlements. The captains were seasoned veterans. Most of them had served through the revolution, and during the ten years following the fall of the Alamo there was not a month when one or more of them did not have his men in the field.

So there grew up now along the frontier a race of warriors who became as adept at tracking, surprise, and ambush as the savages with whom they were contending. From this time on the fighting began to take a new aspect. Formerly it had been every family or group of settlers for itself.

Henceforth, when the alarm was given, all the available men in the country-side turned out, mounted and equipped, to hurry to the scene of the latest outrage and follow the trail of the savages until they overtook them. What had been purely defensive tactics changed more and more with the passage of the years to the offensive, until in the end the Texans were on the aggressive and the hostile tribes were fugitives.

This turning in border history was marked by a long series of terrific battles; for the Comanches, the Kiowas, and the Apaches were the flower of the Southwest's red warriors, and their

chiefs realized that, once they gave up, their hunting-grounds were gone forever. Two things above all else defeated them: the resourcefulness of the white men and their marvelous ability as marksmen. They learned the game of savage warfare until they knew it better than the savages themselves.

Famed Ranger Leaders

There were some of those old ranger captains, like Jack Hayes, John Moore, Erath, Big Foot Wallace, Matthew Caldwell, and Shapeley B. Ross, whose lists of forays and grim stands against odds were as long as those of the most famous Indian chiefs. There were hundreds of men in the settlements who worked hard on their farms in times of peace and went to the meeting-house on Sundays, but who, when they were on the war-path, took the scalps of their dead enemies as eagerly as any Comanche.

John Bird was one of these early ranger captains. There is a creek in Bell County, not far from Taylor's Valley, which is named for him. It was here that Captain Bird and his little company of thirty fought against odds of ten to one and killed twice their own number on a May afternoon in 1839.

At that time old Fort Griffin marked the extreme western edge of the frontier. It stood on Little River, a log stockade built by the family whose name it bore. They and their neighbors used it as a place of refuge during Indian raids. In 1839 the Comanches had been swooping down on the settlements along the Brazos, and finally Captain Bird came hither with his rangers. When they arrived at the blockhouse they found a number of families within its walls. A band of hostiles had been hovering about the place within the last two hours.

They Follow Raiders

The rangers rode right on, and they cut the trail of the raiders a few miles away. They followed it out across the rolling prairie, and in a short time they came on a band of thirty savages skinning buffaloes. The Texans charged, and the Comanches fled across the prairies. Five miles or so further on they made a brief stand on a little rise of land, but scattered once more. The rangers followed hot after them. Finally, when he saw that the horses were getting jaded, Captain Bird gave the order to halt, and the company turned back toward Fort Griffin.

It was near the middle of the afternoon when they reached the creek that was named for their commander. They stopped here to water their horses. When the animals had drunk their fill they started on again, a straggling procession winding through the brushy bottom-land. As the foremost riders were emerging from the timber, forty Comanches, who had been lying in the thickets waiting for them, opened fire.

The ambuscade was well chosen, and the volley caught the Texans off their guard. A good third of them were out in the open, and the others were badly separated in the dense brush. But before the first war-whoop had fairly died away, while the arrows were buzzing past them and shots were sounding on all sides of them, the white men bunched about their leader and listened to his orders.

Find Good Cover

Here where they were, the slope was gentle, but five hundred yards away the land broke more sharply from the creek bottom, and the steep banks of a tributary ravine offered them good cover if they could but reach it.

"We'll head for that," Bird told them.

By this time the Comanches had them completely surrounded. Between this place and their goal the circle was tightest. But when Bird gave the word the Texans charged so fiercely that the enemy broke before them. They raced on across the open ground. They reached the gully's brink and threw themselves from the saddles. Four of the younger men took the horses into the bed of the ravine. The others settled down under the bank to make their stand.

Savages Try Trick

They lay scattered along the slope while the naked riders sped back and forth across the open prairie just beyond easy range trying to draw their fire. Some of the company were busy looking to their primings.

Captain Bird lay under the brink of the bank conferring with his lieuten-

ant, James Robinett, a young German farmer from the Trinity. The Indians had begun to draw away toward a low hill. Now the whole band vanished behind it.

"Going to hold council," the old-timers told the younger men. Ten minutes dragged by. Many of the Texans began scraping out shallow riflepits under the bank's lee with their butcher-knives. A thin thread of smoke was rising from the hilltop. The greenest boy in the company knew what that smoke meant.

Within an hour a long line of savages appeared across the prairie. As they came on some of the company began counting. All hands agreed that there were more than three hundred of them. They rode to within a quarter of a mile and halted, while a few of their number advanced to reconnoiter. Then they turned and galloped to the hilltop.

Indian Rides Forth

Five minutes passed. A single warrior rode out before the Comanches, passing along the entire length of their line, a thick-set man mounted on a fine big American horse. Suddenly he raised his hand, and the three hundred swept down the hill. The leader came first. The Texans saw his gaudy war-bonnet, with a pair of polished bison-horns over his brow, and they knew that they had to do battle with old Buffalo Hump, the greatest of the Southwestern chiefs.

The line reached the foot of the slope and sped on across the level. Through the haze of dust, the war-whoop arose, shrilly ululating. The thunder of the hoofs came as a deep undernote. The Texans lay silent at the gully's edge.

At last their rifles began talking with slow deliberation. Sometimes two or three reports would come in unison; then there would be a brief interval of silence, and after that a series of solitary shots.

Foe Betrays Confusion

A riderless pony broke away from the advancing line; a sudden confusion of forms showed in another quarter. The smooth continuity of the front was gone. Some of the warriors were swerving their ponies. Confusion followed. The rattle of the rifles at the gully's edge grew brisker. The charge turned to a headlong retreat. A few forms lay a-sprawl upon the flat. A pony was kicking the reddened grass in his death-agony.

The Comanches reformed on the hilltop. Within five minutes they came on again. The rangers waited as before; and, as before, they fired with slow deliberation. But this time the sight of the riderless ponies seemed to spur the survivors on. It looked as if they were going to ride down upon the white men and trample them underfoot. Then at the last moment they wavered and fled the second time.

Three wounded men were moaning for water under the bank. Captain Bird was dying from four arrow-wounds. James Robinett, the young farmer from the Trinity, took the command.

The Comanches reformed and made a third charge, but in the moment of their starting it was easy to see that their hearts were not in the movement. And now instead of riding back to the summit they went around the hill to hold their council.

While the Texans waited, Robinett told off three men to drag the wounded down to a spring in the ravine's bed and leave them there. That was the best they could do for them, for there were only twenty-five able to fight now.

Two Parties Attack

Ten minutes or so passed, and then the Indians came on in two bodies. The warriors of both wings wheeled their ponies, riding across the flank of the Texans and firing under the necks of their mounts as they swept by.

But the long-barreled rifles broke such gaps in their ranks as were beyond their endurance, and they retired once more.

"Next time they come," young Robinett said to those about him, "I'm going to get that chief." He crept out into the long grass above the bank and lay there with his rifle. The two wings came sweeping down upon them. The form of the chief appeared out of the dust-haze within one hundred yards of him. He pressed the trigger, and the red leader slid from the bare back of his pony with a bullet-hole in his forehead fairly between the two buffalo-horns.

Comanche Ranks Break

The Comanche ranks were breaking into full flight. A dozen bucks swooped

in upon the body and bore it off. That was the end of the battle. The rangers waited under the bank all that night, and in the morning they rode away to Fort Griffin, taking with them their dead and wounded. In after years the Indians acknowledged that they had lost something like sixty warriors.

They say a man grows accustomed to anything. These early rangers grew so used to fighting against odds of ten to one that they took it as a matter of course and devoted themselves to straight shooting just as a good workman devotes himself to adept handling of his tools when things are coming faster than usual on the job. They were deadly men with their weapons; there is no doubt of that.

In the autumn of 1840 Colonel John Moore and ninety followers charged a Comanche village on the Colorado and slew more than one hundred and thirty warriors in an hour's battle. That same year Captain Jack Hays and twenty men overtook two hundred Comanches who had been raiding the settlements near San Antonio. The Indians made a stand at the crossing of the Guadalupe River, but although they had the advantage of good cover, the Texans routed them and killed some thirty-odd, including the chief.

Ross a Famed Fighter

Shapeley B. Ross was a typical Indian fighter of those times. He was a pioneer of Milam County and lived near the spot where the town of Cameron stands today. In 1842 he slew the famous Comanche chief, Big Foot, and the tale of that battle reads like a page from one of Cooper's Leatherstocking series. This Big Foot was a seasoned old marauder. He stood something over six feet in his moccasins; there were any number of stories of his enormous strength and his skill in combat.

One day Ross and his nephew, Shapeley Woolfolk, were pursuing a band of Indians who had been on a horse-stealing expedition. They came upon the fugitives during a terrific rain-storm at a place that men called the Knobs, a bit of broken country not far from where the town of Temple afterward grew up.

The rain had dampened the primings of the old-style rifles, and at the very outset the affair resolved itself into a series of single combats. How the other members of the ranger party fared has not come down with the story. Ross and his nephew had singled out the chief and were riding toward him, Ross well in the lead.

Big Foot saw the ranger captain and turned the stolen horse that he was riding to meet the charge. The pair raced for each other in very much the same fashion as the knights used to do in the old tourneys.

Swings War Club

The Indian was swinging his war-club; the white man, his clubbed rifle. As the two horses came together Big Foot's weapon descended, but in the very moment of the collision Ross reined aside so skillfully that the blow missed. Before the chief could recover his balance the ranger captain swung his rifle over his shoulders as a man would swing an ax.

In that same instant a Comanche brave, who had ridden up behind him, thrust for Ross with his lance. Young Woolfolk was already charging down upon the buck. Just as Ross's blow was at the turning-point—and as the warrior's lance was plunging toward the former's body — the nephew's horse struck the Comanche's pony.

So it came that the point of the lance merely grazed Ross's ribs. The wound caused his blow to waver. Old Big Foot reined off to one side.

Woolfolk and the younger Comanche went down with their ponies, but the warrior was on his feet almost as soon as he struck the ground. He leaped up behind the chief, and the two of them rode away at headlong speed.

They Pursue Enemy

Young Woolfolk swung back into his saddle and caught up with his uncle, who was already spurring after the fugitives. The race went for something like a half mile over broken country. The pursuers were gaining fast when the horse and its two riders plunged over the brink of a steep limestone bluff. They vanished among the gray sheets of driving rain, as suddenly as if the earth had swallowed them; and before Woolfolk realized what had happened, his horse and he were somer-

saulting after them. Ross managed to pull up. He flung himself from the saddle and slid down the little cliff.

Old Big Foot turned to meet him. Their knives were out. Now they closed in. They wrestled, each gripping the other's right wrist with the left hand. It seemed for a moment as if the Comanche was going to have the best of it. Suddenly, he wrenched his arm free. It swept upward. The knife hung poised above the white man's breast. But before the blow fell the chief slipped backward in the wet grass. Ross tore his right hand free and plunged his own knife hilt-deep into the naked body.

He was—so he used to say in later years when he told the story—utterly spent; his head was reeling when the body crumpled to the earth before him. He staggered off to one side in time to see his nephew scalping the warrior with whom, meantime, he had been at death-grips.

How Wallace Got Nickname

Big Foot Wallace got his nickname from this famous chief, whom he followed a dozen times but never had the luck to kill. Wallace was a typical Texan of the old breed. He came from Virginia when he was a lad, to find that his elder brother, who had preceded him into the country, had been at Goliad with Fannin's men.

The list of Big Foot's exploits against the hostile Indians is too long for this chronicle. Between times he took part in the ill-fated Mier expedition, slaying his good share of Mexicans in the battle on the Alcantra, running his chances with the other prisoners in the black-bean lottery at the Hacienda Salado, to come back across the Rio Grande at last and return to fighting the red men until the Mexican War gave him another chance at Santa Ana. Afterward he took a stage-route contract in the Big Bend country, where the Comanches were trying to drive the company out of business, and helped to clear the route of hostiles.

One day when this Big Foot Wallace was getting pretty well on in years, he cut the trail of a number of Indians near Seven Rivers. He was alone, but he followed the tracks, or there was a high hill just ahead, and he wanted to see which direction the band had taken. He reached the summit, and there they were, not more than a hundred yards away, sixty warriors and a bunch of stolen horses.

Tries Bold Ruse

His mount was jaded. He had not a chance in a race against them. It was such a moment as some famous heroes of olden days would have chosen for dying beautifully. But perhaps death had become commonplace to Big Foot Wallace through close association, and its prospect brought no appeal. At any rate he chose to live, and so he did some quick thinking. Before the Indians had more than caught sight of him he was spurring his horse to a dead run straight toward them. He waved his hat as he came.

"Come on, boys!" he shouted. "Now we've got them!"

They did not even stop to round up the stolen ponies, and he drove the herd back to their owners that same evening.

These are a few of the things which the men and women did who settled Texas. They were but incidents of the life in those early days, incidents which took place, as it were, between times. For the generation which performed these and a multitude of other exploits was the same generation which fought at the Alamo, at Goliad, and San Jacinto; the generation which gave us the story of the Mier expedition and the Republic of the Rio Grande.

From that generation sprang the sons who wandered over the West in the days before the barbed wire fences and the railroads, to show themselves wherever there was fighting.

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NEXT ISSUE'S HEADLINERS

TALLY THE LONG YEARS, an action-packed epic novel of the untamed West by William Hopson—
GUNS AT GALLOWS CROSSING, a swift-moving complete novelet by Dwight V. Swain—
THE MOST CONSUMMATE VILLAIN, a true story of pioneer days by Frederick R. Bechdolt—PHILOSOPHER, AND NO MISTAKE, a Boo Boo Bounce yarn by Ben Frank—plus many other top-flight stories and features!

BY H. L. KIDD, JR.

POOR COOTER!

A pet rattlesnake causes Cooter more woe than the fabulous serpent which stalked the Garden of Eden!

WELL now, all I got to say is heaven pity the man that gets himself hemmed up between a couple of jealous females! You take my old pardner "Cooter" McKee.

There Cooter was down in Sandfly working at a good job, and him and Eulabelle happy as two parsons with a sinner. Then along come Dessie Mae, and now look at poor old Cooter—living out there in California with Dessie, if you can call that living, and pining away for the quiet life in Sandfly, for everybody knows California ain't peaceful the way Texas is. And Eulabelle, she's buried under some kind of a fancy-name bush right beneath Cooter's and Dessie Mae's bedroom window.

"It fair gives me a bad time every now and then," Cooter told me the last time I saw him. "Why Sam, I done got so I can't roll over in the bed without thinkin' about Euly, layin' out there under that sorry bush!'

Poor Cooter! He was looking mighty frayed around the edges, and I reckon

he had a right to be. First place, everybody knows there ain't no real good drinking likker in California the way there is here in Texas. And worse than that, Dessie Mae had gone and joined up in some new kind of a church that don't hold with drinking on Sundays. So old Cooter had been running along four days late and a gallon short every month for close on to a year by the time I laid eyes on him.

He sure was having it hard, Cooter was. Everybody knows if you got to be miserable California is the sorriest place in the world to try to be miserable in; not a bit like good old Texas. Me, I had sense enough to bring a bottle of Sandfly Special along with me and I figured maybe it would cheer Cooter up a mite to give him a little shot.

But that was the wrong thing to do, way it turned out. Because he no more'n got one good taste of that good old Texas white lightning before he laid his head down on his arms right there in the hotel lobby and started to crying.

"Sam, I tell you I just plain cain't stand it much longer," he said, after he kind of got a grip on himself. "I just cain't! In forty-five years of my life, Euly was the only female I ever run onto that knowed my every wish. She was perfect, Sam—and howcome I ever throwed her over for Dessie Mae, I reckon I never will figure out!"

Poor Cooter! It was getting on to my train time, and sorry as I was for him, I just plain up and left him there in the lobby, for everybody knows California ain't got a thing to hold a man that's catching a train for Texas. Besides, I figured Dessie Mae would be by any minute, and me and her never did get along none too good. I always figured she hooked old Cooter when his fences was down, so to speak.

Not that Dessie wasn't a right well-set-up female and likely a sight warmer-natured than Eulabelle, I would of said. Because after all, even down in Sandfly in the middle of August when it is so hot you can fry one egg on the shell of another, a six-foot diamondback rattlesnake is a fairly cold proposition!

Which is what Eulabelle was. Cooter got her when he was working down in Sandfly for the T.&G.N., six-seven years back. He was chief dispatcher, freight-and-passenger agent, telegrapher, and express man for them, and it would of been quite a job for Cooter if they ever had got started with that two-trains-a-day schedule they was talking about before the depression come on.

But the way it was, he had plenty of time to relax. One day he went out for a little walk after he closed up the office at noon, and along about two-thirty Cooter come down the street, carrying Eulabelle.

Euly was just a little bitty old thing, then, not over thirty inches long and with just four or five dime-sized rattles and a button you couldn't hardly make out, it was that tiny.

Lud Eckes mighty near had Cooter to fight, too, the very first hour Cooter had Euly. He just acted like a plain fool, Lud did. The minute he laid eyes on Euly, he give kind of a jump and got all set to stomp her.

"Throw that thing down, Cooter, and let me stomp it!" he hollered, worse spooked up than a steer in a hailstorm. It made old Cooter plumb mad just to watch him.

"Stomp, fiddlesticks!" Cooter told him. He had a couple good shots in him, and he wasn't in no humor to mess around with Lud. "Why tarnation, Lud—I just done this very minute got through spending half an hour of my time taking a big old horny toad out of her mouth! Fool thing must of crawled in there and got itself hung, some way. Poor little Euly here mighty near dead! Why Lud, you ought to be ashamed of yourself! Me and Euly, here, we understand one another—just you looky there at the little thing ketch holt on to my arm!"

AT THAT, they really did get on mighty well. Cooter went and fixed a box for Euly up on the shelf beside the telegram key, in reach of his hand. And he laid a plank down slantways from the floor, so Euly could make it up there without too much trouble.

It was a sight to see, all right—old Cooter sitting there in his swivel chair with that old green eyeshade pulled down over his forehead, sending messages fast as he could tap them out, whilst right there by him laid Eulabelle, all coiled up in her box with a worshipping look in her eyes, just plumb happy to be there with Cooter and watch him work. It really was right touching.

And there wasn't no separating them

two, neither. Everywhere Cooter took a notion to go, day or night, here come Euly, wiggling along behind him like some kind of a puppy dog. It kind of tickled Cooter to see how much Euly thought of him, and if he was aiming to ride out anywheres he would always manage to stick Euly inside his shirt or let her kind of droop around his neck like a bandanna.

"Takes all-fired little to keep Euly happy," Cooter used to say. "She ain't a bit like most females!"

Of course there was some folks that raised quite a bit of fuss. Lots of people will do thataway sometimes, and over less than nothing when you get down to it. Lud Eckes, for one—he never did get to really liking Euly. Him and Arch Heyman and Dude Bose got old Cooter in a draw game one night, and long about one or two in the morning Lud was plumb flat busted.

"Cooter," he said, griping around as usual, "you have done gone and robbed me, is all! Looky there at all them chips you got—just plain out-and-out highway robbery—"

Blip-blip-blip! There was two or three little light taps against Lud's right boot-top, about a inch or so down from his kneecap. He glanced down to see what it was, and he like to passed away right there on the spot. Because it was Euly, and she was looking mean as satan. Her mouth was open and her fangs was sticking out and she was coiled up and swaying her head back and forth a little bit, letting her nose tap against Lud's boot like she was telling him he better keep his griping to himself. Old Lud was sure scared.

"G-good heavens, Cooter," he stammered, his cigarette dropping right into his lap and his fingers trembling till he couldn't hardly pick it up again. "G-good heavens, man! I was just horsing around with you, is all! Tell that there—I mean tell Euly to lay off me, will you? I never thought she could savvy English that good!"

Cooter had himself a good laugh, just watching Lud shake. He always was one to like a harmless joke, Cooter was.

"Euly ain't going to hurt you none, Lud," he told him. "And she don't savvy English, neither—leastways, I reckon she don't although I got to admit she is one more smart snake! But guess the truth is she just don't like the tone of your voice. Some way it don't set well with Euly, whenever folks get to acting up around me."

Well, Lud never said no more. He just paid off and left. But he wasn't none the fonder of Euly for it all. And neither was Parson Harkrider, for that matter, after the way Euly showed him up in front of all them church folks.

It never would of happened, neither, if the parson had of had enough sense to let well enough alone. Cooter, he wasn't a man to be bothering his head about church goings-on very much. All he ever wanted along that line was just to live and let live. But no—things was kind of quiet in Sandfly that summer and Parson Harkrider he likely figured he better start some kind of a pot to boiling just to keep the folks coming in to meeting.

So him and Aunt Lilyrose Mayberry that was head of the Ladies' Auxiliary Society, they went and put their heads together and figured out maybe they ought to church old Cooter.

Poor Cooter! If he had just of been a out-and-out heathen they would of let him alone. But the worst thing he ever done for himself aside from marrying with Dessie Mae, was to go and get religion at one of them spring revivals the second year he was working here in Sandfly.

Of course, Cooter was like most of us folks down here—he never let his religion bother him none after the first few weeks. In fact, he never really held on to it long enough to do himself or the church any good. But Parson Harkrider and Aunt Lilyrose was looking for a backsliding sinner to lambaste, and they up and picked on Cooter.

AUNT LILYROSE, she had it in for Cooter anyway. There she was a widow woman with Dessie Mae on her hands and dying to get her married off. And she had done everything she knew to do besides put a halter on Dessie's neck and hitch her in front of the depot, and still old Cooter never paid Dessie no more mind than if she was kin to him.

So Aunt Lilyrose had done give up hope, and it made her so all-fired mad to get set back thataway that she couldn't wait to get a crack at Cooter. So when she got the chance, she just plain egged Parson Harkrider on to

churching him.

" 'Consorting with serpents', just like the Good Book says, no less!" Aunt Lilyrose told the parson. "Not to mention little things like gambling and drinking and leading our innocent young men of Sandfly in the paths of sin! Go right ahead and church the fat fool, Brother Harkrider! I'll see the Ladies' Auxiliary in this here community is right in back of you!"

"Amen, Sister Mayberry! Amen!" Parson Harkrider said, rubbing his hands together and figuring the collection was due to pick up pretty well during the lean season, if he could manage to drag the churching out over maybe five or six weeks. "I ain't sure if the folks here in Sandfly is concerned over that last part—but that there serpent business is the real thing! Cooter McKee has gone and took up with a prime cohort of the devil, and we got to sock the irons to him no matter how much it may pain us to do our bounden duty!"

Poor Cooter! Time the word got round to him he was going to be churched, he was fit to tie. But after a little he cooled off and figured he would see it through like a man.

"If I got to be churched, I just got to be churched is all," he said, chewing on the end of a pencil and watching Eulabelle play with a big prairie dog she had dragged in. "You know something, Sam—it ought to be kind of interesting, at that, seeing I never been churched before."

"Well, Cooter," I told him, "it is too bad they done picked on you and Euly. But you can count on me—I ain't never run out on a single man yet."

So come Sunday, I went up on the front row and sat down beside old Cooter and Eulabelle. Good old Cooter—he aimed to do things up brown so there couldn't nobody run around low-rating him after it was all over! He was dressed up in his very best boots and his fancy red-and-white cowhide vest, with Euly coiled up beside him with a pretty little blue ribbon tied around her neck, both of them ready to get themselves churched just as decent as they could, seeing it had to be done.

Mighty near everybody in Sandfly had turned out, and after the choir sung a couple of good fast hymns to put folks in the right frame of mind for a first-rate churching, Parson Harkrider up and started letting old Cooter have it.

"There he sets in his shame," he hollered, pointing his finger at Cooter. "Look at him—all togged out like a whited sep-pulcher! There he sets, with the symbol of sin beside him!"

Well, everybody got to looking, but there wasn't nothing there but me and Euly, and they all knowed both of us. So they settled down again and listened to Parson Harkrider lay it on. Cooter, he was tapping the edge of the seat with his forefinger, kind of thoughtful-like, taking it all in.

"He shorely is popping the hooks to me, Sam," he whispered to me, one time when the parson stopped to catch his breath. "He is fair pouring the sand down my well, all right! I never knowed how evil I was, up to right this minute. It kind of gits me down, Sam—thinking what sort of a future I got to look forward to!"

Well now, he couldn't possibly have known right that minute that he was going to have to live in California the most of his life! But it really was a little odd, the way he said a thing like that. I guess, though, that old Cooter was just plain feeling kind of out of place right then, although he was too good-hearted to let on.

And I had started to tell him not to take it so hard, when all of a sudden I noticed Euly was gone off the seat on the other side of him. I looked all around and I never seen her for a minute or two, but after a little I got her spotted, and everybody else did too, just about the same time.

That Euly—she was a pistol! She had crawled down back of the seat whilst everybody was listening to Parson Harkrider, and she must of wiggled along back of the edge of the choir box plumb out of sight of all folks, because there was quite a little rustle of surprise in the congregation when she come out onto the pulpit all of a sudden, right in back of where the parson was doing his preaching.

She crawled up behind his pants legs and coiled up with her rattles sticking up over her head, and she looked down at me and Cooter with a kind of humorous expression on her face.

"Now, just looky there at little Euly!" Cooter whispered, p l u m b surprised. "Ain't she the cute thing, though—up there helping Parson Harkrider?"

THE PARSON was so busy chewing old Cooter over he never took time to glance down. But he could see the congregation was right much perked up all of a sudden, so he figured the time was ripe to lay down his hole card.

"Oh, you generation of vipers!" he bellered, mopping his forehead with the big old blue bandanna he always carried in his coat. "You, Cooter McKee, that carries the seal of the serpent—the Good Book tells us what we got to do with you!"

He pounded his fist on the altar and leveled down on Cooter again. "Bruise ye the head of the serpent!" he squalled.

"If the parson's figuring on any head-bruisin', he fair better git at it quick!" Cooter whispered to me. And sure enough, just about that time Euly up and cut loose with a good healthy rattle, right underneath Parson Harkrider's coattails.

Poor Cooter! He was that embarrassed! And he well ought to of been, too, considering what come off next. Because Parson Harkrider give a little jump, like mighty near anybody down here in good old Sandfly would of done. But he overdone things just a mite, being a real agile kind of a man, and he plumb cleared the altar in front of him from a standing start!

Only he never come down quite right. He had the bad luck to catch the toe of his right boot on the flange of the altar, and it tipped him over and he come down flat on his face in front of the choir box where Aunt Lilyrose was sitting.

That was too bad, but worse was on the way. Because the altar rocked around up there for a minute and then it fell over right on top of Parson Harkrider, and the little door in the bottom part come open and out rolled a big old blue-and-white jug with a corncob stopper in the top.

It kind of spun there like a kid's top for a second, and then the stopper blowed out with a bang and there went all that likker pouring right down Parson Harkrider's collar. Everybody figured it was downright shame—all that good drinking likker wasted thataway.

"Now then, Euly—just looky what you went and done, playing around like that inside the churchhouse!" Cooter told her whilst the three of us was leaving. "See how you busted up a plumb good churching? You ought to be ashamed of yourself, doing a thing like that!"

Euly kind of ducked her head and crawled back in under Cooter's shirt, out of the sun. But what I couldn't figure out was whether Euly had knowed what was in there in the altar box.

"Oh, that there jug—I can't say whether she knowed it for sure, Sam," Cooter said, when I put the question to him. "But then, me and Euly has been leaving the parson's drinking likker in there two or three years now." Cooter looked kind of unhappy. "Four dollars and twenty-three cents, worth gone down the parson's collar. And it ain't even paid for yet! You know, Sam, I got a feeling I ain't never going to git my money out of that particular batch of likker. Never!"

Well, he was right about that, on account of Parson Harkrider left out of Sandfly that very night, heading for California. And that was too bad, too, for everybody knows California don't need preachers like Texas does.

But Parson Harkrider never left by himself. He up and took Aunt Lilyrose Mayberry along with him, which was right much of a surprise to quite a lot of folks in Sandfly. But then they figured the parson would probably marry her, and it wasn't no hide off their backs. Only trouble was, it left Dessie Mae all by herself up there at the old Mayberry place.

Right then was when Cooter's troubles really started, too. He always was too big-hearted a man for his own good, Cooter was. He got it figured out that it was really him and Euly's fault that Dessie Mae was all by herself thataway, and he got to dropping by up there in the evenings, just to help her pass the time away. Not that there was anything serious in old Cooter's mind—not Cooter!

But Dessie Mae now, she was a little mite different. For what with her ma plumb out of Texas, Dessie was having herself one more frolicsome good time, and mighty near anything with pants on was welcome as the spring flowers.

COOTER never caught on very fast. But it didn't take Euly no time at all to figure out the lay of the land, being a female herself. And about the

third night Cooter come home from up to Mayberry's he had a right sharp little set-to with Euly.

"I cain't figure it out, Sam," he told me. "Euly never acted like this before. Why, she just taken one good sniff at my shirt and I be dogged if she didn't wiggle clean out in the kitchen hissing and taking on worse than that there sorry locomotive the company's running through here these days. I just cain't figure Euly out nohow!"

"Maybe she's jealous, Cooter," I said to him. "You know females is likely to get thataway—and you and Euly been mighty thick for a right good spell now!"

Cooter, though, he just had a good laugh, poor devil. Gosh, she ain't got nothing to be jealous of in Dessie Mae," he said. "I admit Dessie is a mighty fine gal, but I ain't the marrying kind, Sam. You know that. Still and all, I reckon I'll carry Euly along with me next time I go up to Mayberry's, so them two can kind of make it up to one another."

Well, that must of really been a sight to see. There was old Cooter setting there in the porch swing, with Dessie Mae on the one side of him and Euly coiled up on the other side. And no matter what Cooter might of wanted, there wasn't no love lost between them two, not for a single minute. Every time Euly would so much as wiggle, Dessie would let out a screech and start giving Cooter down-the-river for bringing Euly along.

"Cooter, honey, that blame thing gives me the creeps!" Dessie told him. She kind of giggled and let her head fall over on his shoulder. "Ain't you never heard three was a crowd on a pretty night like this one?"

Old Cooter, he was plumb hacked. "Sh-h-h, Dessie," he told her, real quick. "You hadn't ought to talk thataway in front of Euly—you might hurt the little thing's feelings!"

He reached down and rubbed Euly's neck, and she wiggled up in his lap and kind of slid across his chest towards Dessie, staring at her like she was wondering where was the best place for the first bite.

"You know Euly is kind of toucheous about me sometimes," Cooter said.

"Well—*I* ain't!" Dessie come back at him, shivering and scooting plumb over in the corner of the swing. "Leastways, not with that there varmint in your lap!"

Euly must not of liked Dessie's tone of voice because she went and throwed her rattles up over her head and started humming, and Dessie jumped up like she was getting off a hot rock.

"You better leave that thing home next time you figure on seeing me, Cooter McKee," she told him, heading for the screen door. "That is, unlessen you're aiming to wear out your welcome in one more trip!"

She slammed on in the house, and Cooter he just set there kind of stunned for a minute or two. Then he put Euly in his shirt and come on back downtown. He was still trying to figure things out a couple days later.

"I reckon I just don't know much about women, Sam," he told me. "You know, I was kind of getting to like Dessie Mae. But now she has done started acting up like that over nothing, I am mighty glad I got by this far with a whole skin!"

He took a couple good swallows and throwed the bottle over on the pile in the corner. "Here's how, Sam!" he grinned. "No ring on her finger—no ring in my nose!"

That Cooter, he was a pistol, them days.

And at that, he likely would of stayed single and satisfied, too, if he hadn't of gone and made himself a small fortune all of sudden. Poor Cooter! There ain't much doubt that too much money has been the ruination of more good men than anything else but women. But Cooter McKee was the one man I never figured would go and get himself ruined by a dollar, seeing he never knowed what it was to have one in his pockets longer than a day at a time.

And maybe he wouldn't ever have got messed up thataway, neither, if there hadn't of been a prison break over at Huntsville, which ain't more than three or four hoots and a hurrah from good old Sandfly. Cooter he never knowed a thing about it till one morning about ten o'clock down at the depot. He was opening things up for the day and here come a couple fellows he never had set eyes on before, walking in the ticket office.

Euly was sleeping in her old cardboard box up on the shelf, and they

didn't either one of them fellows notice her at all.

One of them bought a couple tickets up to Big D, and things was all peaceful as a baby's kiss till Cy Hickson come tearing in the station.

CY WAS sheriffing down in Sandfly then, and he likely learnt more about sheriffing that day than he ever learnt in any one day before or since. Because when them fellows heard him running along outside the window and hollering something about a jailbreak to Cooter, one of them reached under his coat and pulled out a forty-four and rammed her a couple inches deep in Cooter's middle. And the other one grabbed up that there old iron stapler of Cooter's and stepped over by the door jamb and slugged the very fool out of Cy as he come running in!

Old Cooter, he was right put out. There was Cy lying on the floor cold as a iced cucumber and this here one fellow punching in Cooter's stomach with a gun, and the other one standing there swinging that old stapler like he would just about as soon let Cooter have one as look at him.

All that, and the train due in about five minutes and none of the milk cans out on the platform yet.

It would of discouraged mighty near anybody.

"I reckon it just plain ain't my lucky day, gents," Cooter said. "But would you mind if I was to pick Cy up offen the floor there? I just now got this here place scrubbed up—"

"Aw, shut yore mouth, fat boy," the one with the gun told him. "Git on yonder in the corner whilst I figure out what to do with you!"

Well, there wasn't nothing for Cooter to do but just what the man said. So he walked over to the corner, and the fellow with the gun leaned back against the shelf right in front of the telegraph key. But that was too bad for him, though, because no sooner did he lean back like that than old Cooter just turned around and walked back across the floor and picked the forty-four right out of his hand.

And the fellow never made a move to stop him, neither, and you couldn't very well blame him, at that, what with Euly reared up all of a sudden about three-quarters of the way out of her box, with her head stuck over his shoulder like she was playing a game of peep-eye with him and them two fangs not over a inch from his upper lip!

"Now I reckon you might just as well lay that there stapler back up on the shelf, pardner," Cooter told the other fellow, feeling kind of halfway sorry for him.

At that he *was* kind of pitiful to see, standing there like he was froze to the planking, with his jaw dropped down and his eyes bugging out like they was on stems. Old Cooter figured he was likely to pass out like the first one had done if he didn't give him something to do with himself pretty quick. Cooter he always was thoughtful of his fellow man thataway.

Well, the train come and they got the milk cans loaded on and took the two fellows away and carried Cy off up the line to a hospital, and old Cooter he went on back to work, mainly cussing on account of he had to get busy and scrub his floor all over again.

He never give much mind to the whole thing, himself. But a couple days afterwards half the newspaper folks in Texas had done heard about it and they all come swarming down from Dallas and Austin and Houston, and one even come from way outside, up to Tulsa, Oklahoma.

They took a lot of pictures of Cooter with Euly crawling in and out of his shirt, and they asked a lot of questions and hollered and whooped around till everybody in Sandfly kind of got to thinking Cooter had really gone and done something out of the ordinary.

Poor Cooter! It really fretted him a lot to have folks making all that fuss and him in the big middle of it. And he was just about ready to call it a full day and light a shuck on back to the Big Ticket where his homefolks lived, when all of a sudden here come a check for five thousand cash dollars, no less.

For them two fellows wasn't no small potatoes, like Cooter had been thinking, and there was at least two big banking associations that was just plain twenty-five-hundred-dollars' worth of pleased that they was back behind the bars in Huntsville again!

Well, it ruint Cooter! For what with all the fuss and all the money, it made Cooter look like a right good proposition for any woman, with or without Eula-

belle. And Dessie Mae just up and laid her likings by, so to speak, and she fair grabbed old Cooter off whilst he was still dazed from all the ruckus and all the cash.

And I mean she didn't fool around with him, neither! Her and Aunt Lilyrose had it all made up by mail that she was to bring Cooter and come on out to California on their wedding trip. And that was too bad, too, for everybody knows there is plenty of marrying going on in California without them having to pick up a extra couple from way down in Texas.

But Aunt Lilyrose would have it thataway. She had done gone and got shut of Parson Harkrider, or him of her, and she allowed she was kind of lonesome for Dessie Mae. So before Cooter hardly knowed what was happening to him, there he was a married man and him and Dessie was on their way to California, with Euly on the baggage car shut up in a little old wooden box with holes bored in it.

IT MUST of been hard on Euly. By that time she was right well-growed, even for a diamondback, and no doubt she got mighty cramped before ever they made it out to the coast. But she never knowed how really bad off she was till they got settled down with Aunt Lilyrose in one of them pink plaster houses like folks live in out in California, and she found herself out in the garage with a couple old gunny sacks to lay around on.

Cooter like to broke down altogether, trying to tell me the straight of it, that time I run on him in that there hotel lobby out there in California.

"Poor little thing—she never realized what marriage was, Sam," he told me. He kind of shook his head and the tears come in his eyes. "I never neither, till it was too late! But poor little Euly, she trusted me right up to the very last!"

I couldn't help feeling sorry for Cooter.

He sure had it hard, and it was really pitiful the way he told about Euly's last few minutes on this earth.

"There she come, Sam, early one morning about three days after we got to this sorry place, wiggling in through the back door. Up to then she never had really caught on, and she was pleased as a puppy to be gitting in the house where I was. But when she seen me and Dessie there in the bed—well, Sam, the fat was really in the fire then!"

He choked up for a minute, just thinking about it, but he got aholt of himself and went ahead to tell me the rest.

"Seems like she kind of went crazy, Sam," he said. "I never knowed till that minute how much Eulabelle thought of me! She come gliding and rattling acrost the floor, and I seen she meant business! I tell you it was a horrible sight—seeing that gentle little thing drove insane with jealousy!"

"Golly, Cooter, it must of been!" I told him, mighty sorry to hear about a thing like that. "Couldn't you do nothing at all to bring her to herself?"

Cooter looked mighty grim. "I might of saved her," he said slowly. "I might of saved Euly, but Dessie never give me a chance. There was that big old blue-and-white pot of Aunt Lilyrose's down there by the side of the bed, and Dessie she up and let fly with it before I hardly got the covers throwed back!"

Poor Cooter!

His face was screwed up like he was about to cry.

"That there was the first time I fully realized what a hard, powerful woman I had done got tied up to, Sam," he said. "She fair flattened poor little Euly—and she never shed a tear for doing it, neither!"

He glanced off toward the back of the lobby, and I figured he was fighting to control himself. It was a sad sight, I can tell you that.

"No sir, I never had time to lift a hand to save her, Sam," he said, the most miserable-looking human being I ever hope to set eyes on. "It is the one really black thing I got on my soul now. And if I got to live out here in California all my life with Dessie Mae on the one side of me and Aunt Lilyrose on the other—well, it ain't a bit more than I got coming to me!"

Poor Cooter! It was just too bad, but he might have knowed how it would be. If it had of been my choice, I would of stuck with good old Sandfly and Eulabelle, every time. For everybody knows there ain't nothing in California to make living worth while for a man from Texas. Particularly one that is married to a woman like that there sorry Dessie Mae!

Killer's Pattern

I caught several glimpses of the bandit in the Hualpai foothills

A bandit slayer takes refuge on the Myatt ranch, and defies Sheriff Clen Starrett

by **ROGER DEE**

SHERIFF Clen Starrett finished his wide circle of sign cutting and kneed his jaded roan into the hard-packed yard of Jethro Myatt's J Bar M ranch house. The late afternoon sun weighed upon his shoulders like a hot heavy hand, and his nose and throat smarted from dust he had breathed while trailing his quarry across the blistering alkali basin of Indian Hole.

He looked back briefly before dismounting, his lean face so grim he looked older than his thirty years. Hualpai Peak towered against the brassy Arizona sky above Indian Hole Basin where he had found Vince Means' body under a wheeling cloud of buzzards.

To the south of Hualpai by twenty miles lay Titustown, where earlier in the day a masked bandit in a ragged shirt had robbed the Titus County Cattleman's Bank. A few hours later the same bandit had left Vince Means' body, stripped of its shirt, lying in the alkali dust of Indian Hole. The ragged blue garment he had left in exchange was in the sheriff's pocket now, rolled into a small tight bundle.

Clen dropped the reins of his roan at the watering trough under the windmill, halfway between the silent clapboarded bunkhouse and the low sprawl of Myatt's adobe ranch house. He went toward the back entrance on stiff legs, his lean body drooping with fatigue, hitching the walnut-handled Colt to a handier position on his left thigh.

It was not Jethro Myatt who answered his hail but his daughter, June. She came out of the kitchen under the flat

leanto roof that served as a back porch, holding a dish cloth in her hands. Her clear brown eyes changed to apprehension when she saw his face.

"Clen!" she cried out. "What's happened, Clen? Are you hurt?"

She dropped the dish cloth and ran toward him, her eyes anxious. He stood watching her advance, trim in her neat gingham house dress, and he knew that she was all he could have wanted from life. The thought that he now might lose her forever choked his breath.

A few months more and he would have had money enough to ask June to marry him. He could have bought his own little spread and settled down for good. But he had worn a lawman's star too long. If he had to arrest Wayne on this killing she would never speak to him again.

"I'm not hurt," he said.

HE WENT to meet her. Through the open kitchen door he could see old Jethro Myatt and Wayne, June's younger brother, sitting at their supper. The three cowhands working for the J Bar M sat at the table, smoking.

June caught Clen's arm. "Clen, is it Wayne again? Has he done anything really bad this time?"

"I don't know, June," he answered. He hid the dread he felt. "I hope not."

He went into the big earth-floored kitchen. They stared up at him. White haired Jethro Myatt sat at the head of his table, his square red face hard and uncompromising.

Wayne sat at his right, a dark-haired, youth in his early twenties. He had some of June's slender grace, but his eyes were mocking. The three cowhands sat farther down the oilcloth covered table, their faces carefully blank.

"What do you want, Starrett?" Jethro Myatt asked. His voice was impatient. He had little use for law, and he had never cottoned to the idea of his daughter keeping company with a badge-toter.

"A man in a mask and a saddle tramp shirt robbed the Titustown bank this morning," Clen said. His throat felt tight from rising tension. "Six-seven hours later, he killed Vince Means down in Indian Hole flat. I trailed him here, Myatt."

Jethro Myatt's big jaw clamped angrily. "What makes you think he's here, Starrett?"

"Because I cut his sign near the J Bar M before I rode in," Clen said. "The killer traded shirts with Vince before he killed him. He couldn't afford to have you recognize him as the Titustown bandit from the description you'd be gettin' later."

He took the wadded roll of cloth from the hip pocket of his levis and let it unroll. It was an old blue shirt, its front and back in tatters, the sleeves split at the elbows and the collar frayed.

"The holdup wore this to make him look like an owlhooter," Clen said. "But it wasn't worn this ragged—the holes were ripped in it on purpose. And the man who wore it is in this room."

Jethro Myatt stood up, his face beet red with anger.

"You don't know what you're saying, Starrett," he snapped. "My men have been chasing strays all day up in the hills. I think you lost your man's trail and now you're trying to save your face."

Clen hung the ragged shirt on the back of a leather-bottomed chair.

"Cutting out strays is a pretty loose job," he said. "Any one of them could have gone to Titustown across Indian Hole, and you'd never know it. The wind would cover his tracks in a few hours. It was only luck that I was close enough to trail him here."

He looked down the table past scowling Wayne Myatt, sizing up the three cowboys.

Spec Wilder was the only local man among them, a bony good-natured youngster. His carroty hair was rusty from exposure to the sun, and his square Irish face plastered with freckles.

Clen knew "Silk" Sandeau only by sight. Sandeau had been a cowhand for years. His accent identified his as a Canadian. He was tall, solidly built, with a preference for fancy clothes that had earned him the nickname of "Silk Shirt Sandeau."

Cinch Halpert was a small ugly man, stooped with his thirty years of cattle work. His face was wrinkled and his heavy black eyebrows met over a once-broken nose. He stared back at Clen without blinking, his deepset green eyes unreadable.

Jethro Myatt said, "Look here, Starrett, how do you know the same man that robbed the Titustown bank killed Vince Means? I've got a personal inter-

est. Vince was a good friend of mine."

"Because I trailed him from Titustown," Vince said wearily. "He snaked around through the Hualpai foothills all morning trying to lose me before he cut back this way. I caught several glimpses of him from a distance. He was still wearing that saddle tramp shirt when he ran into Vince. Vince recognized him, and he couldn't let Vince live after that.

"Besides that he had to have another shirt. When he got it he rode in here as if he had just come in from punching out strays, leaving poor Vince back there for the buzzards."

WAYNE MYATT stood up, his face contemptuous.

"You're bluffing, Starrett," he said. "You're trying to throw a scare into somebody—me, probably—with your tin badge and your tough talk, to make a big play in front of June?"

June cried out and came into the room, her face scarlet. "Wayne, Clen wouldn't do that!" she protested.

"How do you know?" Wayne shot back at her. "Maybe he robbed that bank himself? Or maybe Vince robbed it and Starrett overtook him and killed him for the loot?"

Clen stifled his anger. "You hate me because I threw you in jail once when you were drunk," he said.

He turned abruptly to Jethro Myatt. "Myatt, I've got a job to do. You said Vince was a good friend of yours. Will you back that up by helping me nail his killer?"

"What can I do?" Myatt asked.

"You can help me search the bunkhouse for that loot," Clen said. "The killer couldn't cache it in the Hualpai hills, because I was too close behind him."

Myatt turned pale with fury.

"You're pointing your finger at Wayne when you say that, Starrett," he growled. "Or at me—and I don't like it. You won't search my house!"

Clen made the play he hoped to avoid. Through it he would certainly lose June. It was the penalty of wearing a lawman's badge, he thought sadly.

"You can't shield Wayne by threatening me, Myatt," he said coldly. "I'm going to get that killer, you or Wayne or one of your crew! I'm the law in Titus County!"

For a moment he thought Myatt would force the play, but the big man caught himself in time. The fury went out of his face and the drift of his eyes toward Wayne told the reason.

"All right, Starrett," he said heavily. "I guess it's the least I can do for Vince. We'll start with the bunkhouse."

Clen heard June's sigh of relief. The three cowhands were watching Starrett.

"It'll be dark in a few minutes," Starrett said. "I want to get this over with."

June caught his arm. "Clen, it can't be Wayne, can it?"

He stared down at her stonily, the hurt inside him twisting like a knife blade. That vision of her sitting across a supper table from him in his own ranchhouse, might never come true now.

He went out to the bunkhouse, leaving her standing in the doorway.

He searched the empty cots, shadowy in the dim light. He peered into the black maw of the cold heating stove, shook out bedrolls and felt in pockets. From a set of pegs over Spec Wilder's bunk he took down a shiny new .30-30 rifle and sniffed the muzzle. It had not been fired.

Myatt followed at his heels, checking whatever he turned up. The three cowhands and Wayne stood in the bunkhouse doorway.

Clen was feeling inside of a dusty boot when Jethro Myatt found the tight roll of bills in Cinch Halpert's warbag. He straightened up, yelling:

"Grab Halpert, boys!" he barked. "Don't let him get away!"

Spec Wilder and Silk Sandeau lunged for Halpert, who yelled and darted down the aisle between the bunks, his face twisted with fear. He snatched down the .30-30 before they could touch him.

"Stop where you are!" he snarled. The loading lever snicked, and the hammer eared back, cocked and ready. "I didn't put that money there, Starrett!"

Wayne Myatt moved and Halpert's rifle swung toward him. Clen threw the boot in his hand instinctively, his hand snaking out his .45.

He did not have to shoot. The boot struck Halpert in the back, knocking him off balance.

Spec Wilder lunged in and got his hands on the rifle, forcing the muzzle upward. Halpert, trying to yank it down again, squeezed the trizzer. The explosion roared deafeningly, the bullet spanging upward through the roof.

Silk Sandeau caught Halpert's wrists, his lips skinned back over white teeth. "Now then, Mist' Halpert," he said exultantly, "you pay for—"

Halpert's threshing knee hit him in the stomach. Sandeau went down, his dark face twisted with agony. Spec Wilder wrenched the rifle from Cinch Halpert and flung it away, lunging for Halpert again. Halpert tumbled backward across the groaning Sandeau.

Spec Wilder followed him to the floor. As Sandeau rose out of the melee, still bent with pain, one of Halpert's flailing boots caught him, the dollar-sized rowel of his spur ripping Sandeau's shirt down the back from neck to belt line.

Spec Wilder caught Halpert's wrists, finally, and held the struggling man helpless on the floor. Sandeau, stepping backward, caught up the .30-30 Spec Wilder had dropped, whipping it hip-high to bear on Halpert. The torn silk shirt flapped open across his back, baring his red-mottled skin.

Staring at the angry red patches on Sandeau's back, Clen Starrett realized the truth like a stab of lightning. The Colt in his hand swung away from the panting Halpert and centered unwaveringly upon Silk Sandeau.

"Drop that gun, Sandeau!" he barked. "I'm arresting you for the murder of Vince Means!"

Sandeau whirled, the .30-30 arcing toward Clen. Clen swung his Colt, but Jethro Myatt spoiled his chance of shooting first by stepping into the line of fire. "You, Sandeau!" he roared. "You dirty, murdering coyote!"

The rifle in Sandeau's hands blasted before Myatt took two steps.

The big rancher lurched back against Clen Starrett, pinning him against the bunkhouse wall, with a bullet hole in his right shoulder. Sandeau sprang through the door, into the deepening twilight, running toward the corral and the horses penned inside it.

Clen thrust Jethro Myatt aside and ran after Sandeau, lining his Colt on the killer's fleeing figure. Sandeau veered sharply as Clen fired, and the slug missed. Sandeau ducked into the corral, dropped to one knee and drew a bead on Clen.

Clen thumbed a shot at him without aiming, dropping on his face as Sandeau's rifle roared redly in the gloom. The slug hissed over Clen's head and slammed into the bunkhouse wall. Another gun began to talk, firing from a bunkhouse window.

Unexpectedly there was the wild screaming of a stricken horse in the corral behind Sandeau, and the thunder of threshing hoofs. The slug from the bunkhouse had nicked a big black in the corral, and fear had driven the whole bunch wild.

Clen shut his eyes sickly to hide the sight of driving hoofs smashing over Sandeau's prostrate body. Sandeau's startled scream reached him faintly above the snorting of the wounded black.

When they reached the corral and quieted the plunging horses Sandeau was only a limp, motionless bundle.

Clen stood looking down at the body, his face hard with the memory of Vince Means lying under a swirling cloud of buzzards.

"Sandeau got what he deserved," he said, looking across the still body into the white face of Wayne Myatt. "He got paid off in his own coin, the way all killers are paid off in the end."

* * * * *

SANDEAU gave himself away when he made his break," Jethro Myatt said later in the J Bar M living room. He winced as June tightened the bandage about his wounded shoulder. "But how did you know he was the killer before he ran for it, Clen? I'd have bet my last white chip on Halpert."

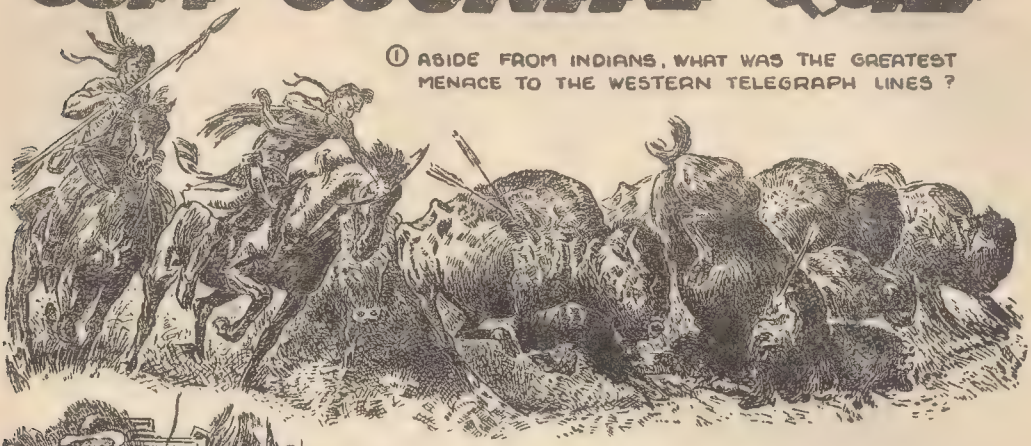
Clen was rolling a cigarette.

"So would I, after finding that bank loot in Halpert's warbag," he said. "Sandeau planted it there to throw suspicion away from himself in case a search was made, figuring to get it back later if it wasn't found. But when Halpert's spur ripped Sandeau's shirt and I saw the patches of sunburn on his back, I knew then that he was the ragged bandit who killed Vince Means.

"No man could possibly ride across Indian Hole in daylight without blistering any skin that happened to be exposed —and if you want to check that, I think you'll find a pattern of sunburns on Sandeau's back that will just match the holes in that saddle tramp shirt I found beside Vince Means' body."

He spoke to Jethro, but his eyes did not leave June's face. He was seeing again, this time with certainty, his vision of her, soft-eyed and smiling, in his own ranchhouse.

COW-COUNTRY QUIZ



① ASIDE FROM INDIANS, WHAT WAS THE GREATEST MENACE TO THE WESTERN TELEGRAPH LINES?

② WHAT WAS THE ROUTE OF THE FIRST GREAT TRAIL HERDS?

③ HOW DID THE OLD-TIME MINERS THAW FROZEN DYNAMITE?

④ WAS A WOMAN EVER CONVICTED OF RUSTLING?

⑤ WHAT WAS THE MOST PROFITABLE "BREED" OF COW?

The answers are on page 157 if you MUST look!

DOUBLE DICK
Rides the Midnight

Blue flowers can be more than a tribute to a beautiful girl

When the man bent to recover his hat, the cane whistled and smacked as it struck

by LEE PRIESTLEY

THE moon silvered the gate and cast a misleading halo around the bald and bearded head that peered through it. A morose burro crowded through the opening. As "Double Dick" Richards followed, the Navy Colts swinging from his waist whacked the bars with a clatter, loud in the midnight silence.

"*Sh-h!* Dern it, pick up yore big feet!" In a penetrating whisper the old man admonished the lynx-gray cat padding on velvet paws.

The door of the poundkeeper's shack opened as the stealthy three passed. Yanking his suspenders over his shoulders, the poundkeeper ran toward Double Dick.

"Hey, you! Where you think you're goin' with that jack? There's damages agin the critter. You got to pay for the three rows of Miss Lizzie Flint's hollyhocks he ate."

The pound man laid a detaining hand on Double Dick's arm, and in so doing,

he trod upon the big cat and too nearly approached the burro. As the cat attacked his bare ankles, the burro's sharp black hoofs rapped his ribs. Then the pound man caught the tip of Double Dick's cane in his stomach. His howls broke off in a gasp as he sat backward, fighting for breath.

"Tell me what to do with my own jack!" Double Dick muttered fiercely.

The three merged with the shadows cast by the Leadville fronts of Main Street. As they neared the tracks, the midnight train whistled waveringly and the steel began to sing. Double Dick lit the lantern hanging from the pick handle on the burro's pack. Then he stepped out and swung the light.

When the train rolled to a stop, he whacked the burro's rump to send him scrambling and plunging up the steps of the caboose. Double Dick climbed aboard with the gray cat rocking precariously on his shoulder.

"Hey, you can't bring that jack in here!" The conductor met the cavalcade in the doorway. "This ain't no cattle car."

"He ain't no cow neither," Double Dick said reasonably, shaking the cat down to the worn, red plush seat. "How much to El Paso?"

"I keep tellin' you, you can't bring that jack in here. Nor no cat neither." The conductor advanced peevishly.

"This here's a accommodation train, ain't it?" Double Dick jabbed a forefinger at the two rows of seats provided for the rare passengers. "Well, be accommodatin'!"

"Company don't say I got to accommodate no menagerie," the conductor argued. "Git, now. I'd hate to kick you off and you a helpless old man."

The gray cat laid back his ears, snarling and spitting. The burro threatened the conductor's leg with determined, yellow teeth. A heavy cane materialized in Double Dick's hand.

The helpless old man prodded the bulge above the conductor's waistband. "Kinda pursey for a young feller, Bub. How much did yuh say for the three of us?"

WHEN the conductor had sullenly pocketed the fares and pulled the signal cord, Double Dick folded his stooped length into a seat. Then he tipped his curly-brimmed sombrero to the back of his head and sang, his voice cracking on the high notes:

> Hand me down my wa-a-lkin' cane,
> I'm gonna take the midnight train-n-n,
> All-l my sins are ta-ken away!

The conductor shuddered. Leaning in the corner, he covered his exposed ear and tried to sleep again. The burro drowsed, droop-hipped, in the aisle. The gray cat folded his front paws under him and wound his black-ringed tail neatly about his body. Double Dick's eyelids closed, and the singing turned to loud and innocent snores.

When the accommodation pulled into the El Paso yards, the old man slept on, the snores that fluttered his beard passing from snort to whistle and back again in unbroken rhythm. The conductor, going off duty, paused in the doorway to give the trio a sour look. The burro opened one eye and shifted his sharp black hoofs. The gray cat, ears laid back, grinned evilly. The conductor muttered and went away.

The caboose was shunted across the yards and coupled to a train making up. Soon the regular click of wheels over rail joints lulled the old man to a deeper sleep. Over the Texas line and on into Arizona, the three snored companionably.

Alighting in Sleepy Cat, Arizona, at the request of the train crew, Double Dick was not impressed with the slumbering town. But his old eyes lighted at sight of the surrounding pink and purple peaks. Mineralized country! Copper, zinc, lead, manganese, asbestos, gem stones, silver—gold, even! He sniffed the sage-scented air, happy as an old mustang returned to his home range.

He whacked the burro's rump. "Boys," he said, turning toward the mesa, "there's a trot in the old hoss yet. Them durn railroaders'll look plumb silly when we come back with enough gold dust to buy up their whole jerkwater line."

An hour later he was thinking about breakfast when he saw the pool of blue water. Halting the burro, he squatted to fill the lard bucket. As it floated and tipped, he sang again:

> Hand me down my wa-a-lkin' cane,
> I'm gonna take the midnight train-n-n,
> All-l my sins are ta-ken away!

His cracked old voice covered the sound of an approaching rider. So he

spun around, startled, when a derisive newcomer said, "Your worst sin was trying to sing in the first place, Grandpop."

Double Dick flicked the panama hat from the man's head with the ready cane. "Dern dillied-up dude callin' me Grandpop!" he snarled. "I got a mind to—" Beard wagging ferociously, he stared the stranger up and down from polished boots to small mustache.

When the man discovered and bent to recover his hat, the stretched seat of the immaculate cords was an opportunity. The cane whistled as it slashed through the air and smacked as it struck. Straightening with a howl, the young man's hand darted for a pocket.

"Careful, Bub," Double Dick advised, wagging the cane for emphasis. "Keep yore gun in yore pocket and a civil tongue in yore head. Then mebbe yuh'll live so long a city galoot can call *you* Grandpop."

The man's eyes were venomous, but the corners of his mouth lifted in a facile smile. "My dear sir, if I offended you by a mere pleasantry, I hope you'll accept my apologies."

Double Dick did not listen. "Say, you ain't prospectin', are ye?" he asked suspiciously.

"Is this a good place?" the man questioned in his turn. "Have you made a strike?"

Double Dick shook his head over such a greenhorn. *Ask* a man if he'd made a strike!

"Well—" he hesitated slyly. "If you won't let it out— See them rocks at the foot of the mountain yonder? Ever' last one pure bronze!"

The man whistled, "Pure bronze!"

Double Dick was flabbergasted at such ignorance. Then the burro who had been nosing around the two planted his small black hoofs on a rock and leaning forward, delicately pulled a spray of blue lupines from the man's buttonhole. He ate the flowers slowly and with appreciation.

Watching the man ride away in a fury, Double Dick scratched his jaw through the white beard. "The way he acted, you'd thought them blue flowers was worth their weight in gold. Kinda funny—when the whole canyon yonder is full of 'em."

He hitched up his suspenders then and struck off briskly. Until midafternoon he prospected the canyon filled with blooming lupines like a blue river. Gradually working toward a cross trail, he was so intent he did not see the man and girl who sat their horses there until he was close to them. Nor did they see him.

The girl was cute and small with blue eyes and yellow hair curly as carpenter's shavings. She just about reached to the man's shirt buttons, and Double Dick couldn't blame him when he slid his arm around her waist. The old man stepped behind a rock. He wouldn't want them to think he was eavesdropping, and he could hear fine from there.

"Lorena, honey," the man said, "let's ride to town and get married. While your pa was so bad, I knew you couldn't leave him, but now he's gone, and there's nobody to take care of you—"

"I don't need anybody to take care of me," Lorena said pettishly.

"But, honey, things'll go to rack and ruin in no time—"

"Bill Masters, I've managed ever since pa got hurt, and if you see any signs of rack and ruin, I'll thank you to keep them to yourself!"

"You been doin' all you could; I know that," Bill said. "But it's not fit work for a girl. Folks will talk, too, you livin' alone."

ANGRY tears made Lorena's eyes sparkle. "That's the poorest reason for getting married I ever heard. And I'm not alone. There's Lola, my housekeeper, and my aunt will be coming soon. So folks can go right back to minding their own business."

"Of course, the looks of things ain't the only reason you'd ought to marry me," Bill agreed. "The ranches side by side the way they are, they'd make a nice big spread throwed together."

Back of his rock, Double Dick shook his head pityingly. The pore dumb young feller was gettin' in deeper and deeper every time he opened his mouth. With the girl feelin' pettish to start with— From what he'd heard, Double Dick judged she was wore out with nursing her pa before he died and with grievin' after. That Bill ought to know it wasn't no time for an argument. Time to kiss the spunky, independent girl and hit a high lope for a license.

But Bill kept on talking. "Folks expect you and me to get married. Ain't

nobody else around—"

"Bill Masters," Lorena said in a fury, "don't you dare say I have to marry you because nobody else will have me!"

"Aw, honey, I didn't say that," Bill protested.

"That's what you meant. I'll show you! I'll find somebody who wants to marry me because he l-loves me." Lorena's breath caught on a little sob, then she said angrily, "Go on home, you—you great lover, and don't come back!"

Double Dick shook his head until his beard wagged. The boy was shore dumb with wimmen. He took Lorena at her word and rode off, haughty as a tom cat. If he'd looked back he would have seen Lorena in tears.

Double Dick came out from behind the rock then, unfurling his bandana and handing it to the girl. "Don't waste no salt water on him, sister. I can lay my hand on twice as good a man, and no trouble."

"You cannot!" Lorena snapped at him. "Bill is twice as good as anybody else, even if he is thick-headed." She wiped her blue eyes and turned on him. "And what business is it of yours?"

"None, I reckon, but when I see a purty girl, plumb mistreated— Say, is this part of your ranch? If it is, I been trespassin'."

"Never mind," Lorena said. "Do you mean you've been prospecting? Dad used to be a miner over in New Mexico, but he never dug any here."

"New Mexico, huh?" Double Dick repeated. "What was his name, sister?"

"Bates. Sometimes his friends called him Bet-a-Nickel Bates."

"Say, now! Did yore pa ever work at White Oaks? In the Bridal Chamber mine?"

Lorena nodded. "He bought this ranch with the money he made there."

"He said he was goin' to ranchin'. Sister, I knowed yore pa well."

Double Dick could be good company. Before long, Lorena asked him to supper at the ranch, mentioning that she'd whip up a batch of fried pies. Mouth watering in anticipation, the old man slicked himself up. In a burst of gallantry, he picked the lard bucket full of the blue lupines and followed Lorena at the burro's slower pace.

At the door of the ranch house, he presented the dripping flowers and began the speech he had made up. "Posies to the purty, and—" His voice died away as the man sitting at the table looked up. It was the lippy young sprout who had called him Grandpop. Double Dick sniffed, "Well, I see you ain't keepin' good company."

Lorena took the flowers and thanked him. As she arranged them in a pottery jug on the window sill, she said gayly, "Mr. Comstock is good company and special company. He's found a fortune for me. See?" She pointed to a small heap of blue-gray crystals on the table. "Mr. Comstock found them in the canyon. He's a mining engineer from California."

Double Dick gulped, remembering the bronze rocks. He picked up a few of the crystals, trickling them through his gnarled fingers. One or two of the larger stones he looked at searchingly before he dropped them back to the table.

"What does Mr. Minin' Engineer say them is?" he asked.

"They're sapphires." Lorena was excited.

"I've offered Miss Lorena five thousand dollars for a strip of land so the stones can be taken out." Comstock spoke for the first time.

Double Dick's bushy brows lifted high. "Five thousand dollars? Mister, what's yore game?"

Comstock wheeled in his chair. "What do you mean? I simply want to buy some land so I can mine—"

"They're sapphires all right," Double Dick said, "but no man with a grain of mineral sense would look at 'em twice. They're small, too light colored, and bad flawed." He glared at Comstock. "So I say there's somethin' mighty funny—"

"Miss Lorena, if this nosy old nuisance—"

"Dern, dillied-up dude! Call me nosy, will ye?" The can threatened Comstock, but Lorena flew between it and the cowering target.

"Stop it," she commanded. "You can't fight in my clean kitchen."

Double Dick lowered the can. "Jest the same, them sapphires ain't worth a plugged nickel."

"Miss Lorena—" Comstock's voice was stiff with outrage—"I am not taking advantage of you. Quite the contrary. What this— this—gentleman can find suspicious in my offer to pay more than the land was worth—"

Lorena stared hard at Comstock.

"Those sapphires aren't valuable?"

"Your belligerent friend is right; the sapphires aren't gem quality," Comstock said reluctantly. "But I own a company that makes semi-precious jewelry. Sets of garnets, gold-stone beads—that sort of thing. So I can use the sapphires."

"But did you offer me more than the stones are worth?" Lorena demanded.

COMSTOCK studied his hands with apparent interest. "I could speak with more freedom if we were alone."

"Don't mind me, Bub," Double Dick said, wondering if "belligerent" meant what he suspected it did.

"A sweet brave girl," Comstock began. "Alone in the world, too proud to accept any help, so I hoped—"

Lorena interrupted him. "Are you trying to say you thought you'd get me thrown in with the bargain?" She tossed her curls angrily. "Your hat's on that chair."

When she would not listen, he finally picked up the hat. At the door he made another plea to her stiff back. The interested burro, standing in the dooryard, moved forward to sniff at the panama Comstock held down at his side. Then lifting rubbery lips, the burro took a large bite out of the hat brim and chewed reflectively.

Double Dick finished a tale of the silver boom days and the last fried pie at the same time. As he pushed back from Lorena's table he noticed the cat Catastrophe noiselessly snarling, lynx ears laid flat. The cat's eyes moved to the open kitchen window where the early moon silvered the pottery jug of lupines.

As Double Dick stared, a hand tugged at the blue flowers held tight by the mouth of the jug. He kicked his chair behind him, roaring a challenge and charging the window. He was lifting the Navy Colt when the hand threw the jug. The shot smacked into the ceiling, filling the kitchen with sound and showering dust and splinters.

Water in his eyes and a knot on his head, Double Dick staggered over the pottery shards to the door. But by the time he trod upon the cat and pushed aside the screeching Mexican housekeeper, the stealer of flowers was only a pounding of hoofs on the trail.

Lorena felt nervous after the puzzling uproar, so Double Dick moved his traps into the little bedroom off the kitchen as a protector. After he got into bed, he thought about Lucky, his young pardner back in Desert City.

Lucky ought to get married. And Lorena's cooking ought to be done for someone who would appreciate it. Lucky could ranch on Lorena's spread as well as on the canyon back home. Double Dick got out of bed and wrote a letter, chewing a pencil laboriously under the light of the oil lamp.

Sleepy Cat, Arizona
Tuesday, I reckon

Dere Lucky,

Come on a high lope, son. She's purtier'n a spotted heifer and she can make lickin' good fried pies.

Yore friend,
Richard Richards

P.S. Her sody bread is jest middlin', but she can likely do better.

Then he settled back to sleep. In the next days he ate his weight in fried pies as he protected the two women. When Bill Masters rode up in a day or two, Double Dick was mildly flattered to hear that he was a source of scandal. Not that it made much difference what Bill thought. The pore dunderhead got in so bad with Lorena that she heaved a bowl of cake batter at him. It seemed likely Bill would stay away.

But Morgan Comstock came around again, and Lorena didn't chase him off. Double Dick was considerably puzzled. She wouldn't talk about selling the strip of land, but she plainly was no longer angry about it. Comstock came more and more often. As the days went by, Double Dick swore he couldn't set a foot down flat without findin' a slicked up smarty under it.

And Lucky didn't come. Double Dick began to meet the morning train from El Paso in his anxiety. If Lucky didn't get there and start courtin' pretty fast, Lorena might do somethin' foolish, like marryin' Comstock. The way he drooled after her, like a calf follerin' the milk pail, it was plain she could have him for the takin'.

One morning Double Dick hitched the burro to the station rack beside a bay he recognized as Comstock's and went out on the platform to wait for the train. At the Wells Fargo window, Comstock, with two small boxes in hand, asked about a telegram. When the agent brought the message, Comstock shoved the small boxes in, paid for their ex-

press, and turned away. He ignored Double Dick completely.

The old man could tell that the telegram was good news by the satisfied set of Comstock's shoulders as he jerked the reins loose and pushed the burro aside. Unwisely, he used the hand that held the telegram for the pushing. The burro was neither disturbed nor budged, but he was curious. He took a large bite out of the yellow envelope under his nose.

Snarling, Comstock snatched at the message. He got the telegram back, minus a large semicircle from the middle. Sputtering with rage he flung himself into the saddle and rode away. The burro stared after him placidly, then spat out the bite of telegram. When the wind skimmed it to him, Double Dick set a foot upon it.

The message had been sent from San Francisco. That was plain from the fragment at the top: ". . . *an Franc* . . ." But the half-words at the bottom were not so clear. ". . . ines show strong man . . ." Double Dick puzzled over it until he heard the whistle of the approaching train. Then he moved over to the agent, hurriedly checking bills of lading.

"Want I should give a hand, Bub?" he asked. "I'm too triflin' to steal anything."

The agent grinned and nodded. "You can move that little stuff out. I got more heavy shipments than usual to 'tend to."

Double Dick stacked packages until he reached the two small ones Comstock had handed in. Very light in weight, both were addressed to a Johnson and Barton in San Francisco. When the agent checked the bills of lading, the old man craned until his far-sighted eyes could read what the contents were declared to be. Not that he was any wiser.

LUCKY had not come. The only passenger for Sleepy Cat was a spare, tall woman who exuded disapproval from the toes of her button shoes to the poppies and corn flowers on her hat. Double Dick stared in horrified unbelief. He dodged behind the station, then cautiously laid an eye to the corner. Miss Lizzie Flint from Desert City! Toe tapping in annoyance at someone's tardiness in meeting her. Miss Lizzie who could collect damages for them hollyhocks!

Double Dick hastily untied the burro and whacked him to a temporary trot. "We got to git outa here! But how'd she know to foller us?" The three dodged into a clump of salt cedar.

Double Dick tramped with his head turned apprehensively on his shoulder like an owl scared up in daytime. That was the reason he caromed into Joe Carson, the assayer, coming out of his office.

Double Dick grunted, "Sorry, Bub, I wasn't lookin'." Through the windows of the office he saw the clay retorts and the balances of the assayer's work table. "Say, you're in the mineral business?"

Carson nodded.

"You know two fellers in 'Frisco named Johnson and Barton?" the old man asked. "That would have somethin' to do with minerals?"

"There's a Johnson and Barton firm of chemists and mineralogists," Carson said. "I've heard some talk that they've developed a new method of prospecting. Something sure fire."

Double Dick scratched his jaw through his beard and hitched absently at his suspenders. "Could be the ones, I guess," he said thoughtfully. "Somethin' else I'll ask you, Bub, you bein' so accommodatin'. What's a 'Bot-an-ickle Spes-eye-mun'?"

Carson repeated the syllables blankly. " 'Bot-an-ickle Spes-eye-mun'?" Then the sounds made sense to him. "Oh, you mean 'Botanical Specimen.' That's flowers and leaves, maybe a whole plant."

"Flowers, huh?" Double Dick grew suddenly brisk. "Thanks, Bub. Maybe I'll be 'round with payin' business some time."

At the ranch, no one was home except Lola, the Mexican housekeeper. Double Dick packed his prospector's kit on the burro. When he gave his old brush jacket a shake, a letter fell from the pocket. He stared down at it glumly. No wonder Lucky hadn't come; he hadn't mailed the letter to him. He pondered the situation in the light of no Lucky arriving to show Lorena the difference between a city slicker and a real man.

Outside he stared at the cat and the burro. "Well, that leaves it up to us, boys," he said. "We got to raise ourselves to a gallop!"

Crossing the mesa, the three climbed among the tumbling rocks to a perch above the water hole trail. Double Dick kicked the loose stones away from a spot of shade and settling his sombrero

over his eyes, took a nap.

When the noon sun had drained away the shade, he heard the *clock, clock* of hoofs below. He waited until bay horse and well dressed rider had merged with the heat waves in the distance. Then he followed. Keeping to rough ground in the wake of the swirling dust, he began a wide swing that would bring him behind the rocks at the canyon's mouth.

As he rounded cautiously into the opening, a carbine boomed and reechoed. Gritty dust stung Double Dick's face and a ricocheting bullet caromed from the rock face with a *zing!* like an angry hornet. He flogged the burro and flung himself flat.

"Ambushed us, cute as a Comanche!" he yelped. "I'd oughta look closer to home for clabberheads." He hugged the rock as a searching bullet whined close. His old eyes angry, he growled, "Pinned down flat as a stepped-on horny toad."

He gathered his feet under him cautiously. His rush carried him safely behind the rock, but the screech of stepped-on Catastrophe and the clatter of the burro's hoofs telegraphed the move across the canyon to bring another flight of the deadly, leaden bees.

"Thinks he's shore got us in a tight, now," Double Dick muttered. "Lissen, Bub, you ain't caught no old mountain goat until you hang up his horns."

Then he considered his next step. He could sling some lead at the other side of the canyon, but what was the sense of it with nothing in sight to aim at? He dodged as another bullet bounded off the rock face. In a burst of irritation he bombarded the canyon side in his turn. Then shrugging his shoulders, he dropped his smoking Colts into their holsters. There still wasn't no sense in it.

Thoughtfully, he scuffed the gritty silt at the base of the rock that sheltered him. Mighty loose stuff. Now, if he could be in two places at once—here behind the rock and across on the rim above—Or, if he could make out he was still here— Absently, he hitched his suspenders. Then he looked with sudden attention at the elastic under his thumb. His beard began to wag with satisfaction.

"C'mon, boys," he whispered, "and pick up yore big feet."

Turning back, they picked their way silently behind the screening rocks, retracing a part of the swing that had brought them to the canyon's mouth. Every few feet Double Dick pitched a handful of gravel back to the position they had left. As they neared the last boulders, he anchored the burro to a stunted juniper. Now he would have to cross unseen the few open yards at the canyon mouth.

He was too far away now to pitch gravel back to the rock he had left. But the eyes behind the carbine must be kept trained on that spot. Double Dick unhitched his suspenders and wound them around his fingers in a parody of a sling shot. A kid in the primer class would have laughed his head off at such a contraption, but it worked. He sprayed the canyon side, where he had been, with rocks.

NOW! Face downward, mouth full of grit and eyes stinging with alkali, Double Dick hitched himself across the open space. Slowly he reached the larger rocks that had been piled up by the last rush of water down the canyon. A spot between his shoulder blades flinched all the way, anticipating a bullet. When he was safe behind the junipers that spilled over from the higher ground, he sighed in mighty relief and spat the sand out of his mouth. Then hunched over, he climbed to the rim.

A tan patch down the ledge was the man behind the carbine. For a moment, Double Dick's gnarled fingers clamped the Colts. Still, he wanted the feller more or less alive.

The steel shod cane made a good pry pole. Double Dick heaved at the barrel-sized rock near the rim. Too bad it would bounce off the ledge, but the sand and gravel ought to pile up good. When he felt the rock loosen in its bed, he stepped back.

Then he prodded, hard. Slowly, the rock tipped, came away, bounding and tumbling. Behind it loose sand and gravel moved in a gigantic motion, just as the slide hit the ledge.

Double Dick crossed the gravel fan again and untied the burro. No need for creepy-crawly travel now. In the canyon, he observed the results of his labor. Covered up plumb to the neck! Nicely held down, but not killed by the bounding rock. Like a rat in a live trap. Double Dick tipped a hand in a derisive gesture and plodded through the blue lupines.

Later in the assay office, he looked with satisfaction at the sample slips

Carson handed him. "Them sapphires fooled me a while," Double Dick said, "And I didn't know about this new stuff that plants can show where minerals lie. If I'd talked to you sooner, I mighta got on to this testin' flowers and leaves—what you eddicated fellers call 'bot-an-icle spes-eye-muns'—to see if they got more than the usual traces of metals in 'em. If they show lots of minerals, you dig where you found the plants.

"I'd oughta got on to it sooner though. Back where I was raised in Missoury, we knowed that where the wild pansy crowded out other green stuff, you could likely find zinc ores. In Lorena's canyon now, it's manganese underneath that makes them flowers so uncommon blue and thrifty. Well, I better go tell her about it."

In the ranch dooryard Double Dick met Bill, coming to apologize for getting hit with the cake batter. But Lorena didn't answer their hail. Instead, Miss Lizzie Flint appeared, looking as if she had smelled something unpleasant.

"I'll thank you to stay off my niece's place," Miss Lizzie said at sight of Double Dick. "A contaminating old influence like you—"

"Yore niece's place?" Double Dick was puzzled. "And you be careful who you call a influence."

"Certainly my niece's place," Miss Lizzie said sharply. "My own sister's child. I hated to leave my nice place in Desert City, even after that animal ruined my hollyhocks." She stopped to glare at the burro standing at the door, ears bobbing placidly. "But I said to myself, 'Lizzie Flint, it's your duty to go do for that poor orphan.' "

Double Dick swallowed hard. "You—you're comin' to live with Lorena?"

"Nobody can say Lizzie Flint ever turned her back on her duty."

Double Dick wiped his forehead. Suppose he'd mailed that letter to Lucky? Suppose Lucky had married Lorena? Even if she would be rich as greases that wouldn't make up for having Miss Lizzie Flint in the family.

Miss Lizzie noticed Bill then. "You might as well go on, too," she told him. "Lorena won't be interested in you—not when she's married to that elegant, rich Mr. Comstock."

"Married!" Bill yelled.

"Married!" Double Dick howled. "To that cold-eyed crook? That swindlin'—"

Bill ran for his horse. As the boy whirled into the saddle, Double Dick hollered after him. "Don't put yore foot in yore mouth this time. Whale the daylights outa him, kiss the girl and hunt the preacher." As Bill pounded out of the gate, Double Dick cupped his hands and bellowed. "Hit him a good 'un for me."

Miss Lizzie's head stopped swiveling, and she fixed her eyes on Double Dick. "Richard Richards, if you've spoiled Lorena's chances with that elegant man, I'll—I'll have you in jail," she said fiercely. "For attempted murder! He told us you tried to kill him when he found you in Lorena's canyon. It was the Lord's blessing he escaped—"

"I dunno about the Lord," Double Dick growled, "but I didn't think the Devil hisself coulda got Comstock outa that slide."

"He said it was a miracle. The rocks and sand smashed some junipers, and they slanted over the ledge where he was and kind of protected him."

"I knowed I'd oughta bury him dead instead of alive," Double Dick muttered. "But Bill will likely stop his clock." He eyed Miss Lizzie sternly. "You put down that umbrella whiles I tell you a few things."

MISS LIZZIE'S mouth was hanging open by the time he finished. "Comstock was going to marry Lorena because he couldn't git her land no other way? Her land that's got a fortune in manganese on it? Oodle her outa her own money?" Miss Lizzie clapped on her hat. "Let's go help Bill."

The flowers in her hat bristled with her indignation. The burro stepped up on the mounting block beside her. With one sidewise, garnering motion he mowed the top of Miss Lizzie's hat cleaner than a sheep pasture. Eyes closed, he chewed delicately.

Double Dick closed his eyes for an instant, too—in horror. Then he whacked the burro and kicked the cat while Miss Lizzie's hands still explored where the flowers had been.

Far away, Double Dick heard the whistle of the night train for El Paso. He urged the burro to greater speed. Then he raised his voice in a facsimile of song:

> Hand me down-n-n my walkin' cane,
> I'm gonna ta-a-ke the midnight train,
> All-l my sins are ta-a-ken away!

HOMESTEADING has a NEW LOOK

The wild dashes for Government land are no more, but greater opportunities are offered!

by JOHN A. THOMPSON

SHADES of the wild dash for Government land in Oklahoma's old Cherokee Strip! Homesteading in the West has a new look. It's a postwar, strictly modern version of potentially rich farm lands that Uncle Sam is offering today's homeseekers.

No dust bowl acres these. No dry land farms that may produce a crop, and then again, may not.

The modern homesteads, raw Government land within the widespread new Bureau of Reclamation projects scattered throughout the West, come with water assured and ready to be developed by the homesteader into valuable irrigated farms. It is a bonanza land deal for the lucky—and the enterprising.

New Farms In Prospect

Under the new system hundreds of thousands of once barren acres in the western States will be turned into crop-producing farms as fast as the Reclamation projects are completed and water for irrigation is made available. The whole thing is a gigantic undertaking. What will probably turn out to be the greatest land rush in United States history is in the making right now as a result of this program.

The rush will continue at an increasing pace as time goes on. Perhaps all through the coming decade. A fitting answer to the too often expressed statement that homesteading in the West is dead. Proof positive that opportunity still exists for the pioneer-spirited willing to settle in, and grow up with these new, man-made irrigated farm communities.

There is little of the old style whoop-de-do connected with the already started present land boom. No galloping across the prairie, or buckboard racing over rough terrain to be the first to set your claim stakes in. And none of the fighting off rival claimants with guns, knives, fists or hayforks that marked the wild dash for free land when the Cherokee Strip for instance was opened to entry back in 1893. No jumping the starting gun in a rugged attempt to beat your neighbor either.

The new lands will be laid out in farm units of sufficient size to maintain a farm family and provide the new settler with an adequate income almost from the start before the blocks of raw land are made available to the homesteaders.

Modern Homesteading Planned

There will be excitement of course. There's bound to be in any ndertaking that will in time so profoundly affect the lives of so many of our citizens. But homesteading has grown up with the years. As carried out at present and planned for the future settlement on irrigated public lands in the West is and will continue to be an orderly process.

The thing to do is to get your application in early. That's right. And that's all. The modern homesteader, anxious for a farm unit on public land within any of the specific Bureau of Reclamation projects in the West, can file his preliminary application from wherever he happens to be—or live. Veterans of World War II have first choice.

The filed out application papers are then studied by special boards composed of local farmers on each project, Government authorities and other citizens. These various boards treat each application separately, and on its own merits. They first weed out those rom persons whose health, lack of previous farm experience, or lack of the minimum capital believed necessary to carry on (generally from $1500 to $2000 required) indicate the individuals would not be likely to succeed in the venture.

Fair Deal Is Assured

Then as soon as blocks of farm units are ready on the different projects, the names of the applicants who passed the checkup are placed in a "fish bowl." After that the drawing is in the lap of the gods. On a day set for the occasion the names—or rather numbers—of the lucky land winners are drawn from the bowl by some prominent, or pretty local citizen.

The applicant doesn't even have to be present at the drawing. If his number comes up, and he is awarded one of the new homestead farms the local board will notify him—by wire.

The drawings are made necessary because of the fact that there have been—to date at least—so many more qualified applicants for each opening than there were farms available.

Modern Americans with the urge to homestead and own their own farm in the West are taking to this ultra-modern version of homesteading like ducks to water. Cold figures tell the story. For example when the Cherokee Strip was opened three times as many persons tried to obtain homesteads as the land could accommodate. In a recent drawing for a block of farm units in the Klamath irrigation project in south-central Oregon there were *thirty* times as many applicants as there were farm units available.

Veterans Get Lands

So far these new style homesteads have gone exclusively to qualified ex-servicemen of World War II. The veterans have been granted a priority in

their applications. However, in the thousands of acres of irrigated land that will eventually be available for farm settlement the rest of us will get our chance later. It will come, perhaps this year, perhaps in the next year or so as more of the vast irrigation projects are completed, and the land made ready for farm use.

Meantime no one should begrudge those who fought so valiantly in the recent war their first crack at the new land. As a matter of fact awarding Government land or giving homestead priority rights to those who have fought for their country is an old story in the United States. It dates back to Revolutionary days when Congress gave away public lands to the boys of '76 who fought for our liberty and freedom, and the very founding of our country.

Large numbers of Revolutionary War soldiers took advantage of the first land grants. They started the homestead ball rolling, and became, in many instances, the pioneers who opened up the rich Ohio valley and mid-west farm country, then wild land on the edge of the original settlements of the former Thirteen Colonies. It was largely this policy of land grants to ex-soldiers that created the later States and rolled back frontier after frontier as the U.S. grew from a small seaboard nation to a great country extending clear across the continent.

Homesteading Is Democratic

Homesteads were and are democracy in the making. Millions of enterprising plain John Q. Citizens have benefited by them. So did many whose names later became famous. A lean, lanky backwoods militia captain by the name of Abraham Lincoln received 120 acres from the Government for his services in the Black Hawk Indian war—long before he became President. Robert E. Lee and Ulysses S. Grant both were the recipients of Government homestead land for the active service they performed during the time of the War with Mexico.

Years earlier Lafayette also shared in the Government's land bounty. He was given outright 23,000 acres, including what is now Tallahassee, the capitol of Florida.

Irrigation Aids Farmers

Water over the dam perhaps, but interesting homestead sidelights. Today, while homesteading and the nation's growth have marched along hand in hand, the call is for water not over the dam, but into irrigation ditches so that more public land may be made available to qualified citizen homeseekers in the remaining frontier sections of our West.

Through homesteading, and other land grants title to more than a *billion* acres of U.S. land has already passed from the Government to private individuals. Perhaps roughly half a billion acres of public land still remain in the United States. Of this a large portion has been set aside as national forest reserves, national parks, Indian lands and reservations, and necessary military and naval reservations.

Another large block has been turned into Federal Grazing districts for the benefit of ranchers in the West and to replace the old open range in the western cattle country States. Still another huge block—perhaps close to 125,000,000 acres—has not yet even been surveyed. Much of this latter land is rugged mountain, or desert country. There is not much chance of its becoming usable for normal farming or other agricultural homestead purposes.

Offers Best Chance

It doesn't leave as much suitable homestead land in the West as there used to be as far as old-fashioned homesteading is concerned. Though there is still a limited chance for locating isolated parcels of homesteadable agricultural land here and there in the West, the main opportunity and the best bet is the irrigated land now being opened up within Bureau of Reclamation irrigation projects.

This should help explain to present day homesteaders why the non-vets must wait awhile and why World War II veterans have been provided by law with a 90-day preference in homesteading the public lands encompassed by the Bureau of Reclamation's irrigation program. It is an old American custom to give our returned fighting men an edge over the rest of us as far as public land is concerned.

That basically is how come the veter-

ans of World War II have been granted their priority in obtaining farm land in the newest and most modern farm land frontier the West has ever known. Yet few, vets and non-vets alike are actually aware of how extensive this man-made irrigated farm frontier actually is—or how large it will become in the ensuing years.

Let's take a look at a few figures. Within the next year or so some 100,000 irrigated family-size farms are slated to be opened to modern homesteading. To provide these farm units about 4,000,000 acres of reclaimed western States land will be readied for irrigation. And that's just the immediate program.

Units Are Awarded

The start has already been made. Hundreds of World War II veterans, all of them pioneer-spirited western homestead seekers, have even now been awarded farm units on such various Bureau of Reclamation projects as Tule Lake in southern Oregon, the Gila and Yuma irrigation projects in Arizona, the Riverton and Heart Mountain districts in Wyoming and in other projects in Idaho and Washington.

On some of these homesteads houses are up, and the first crops planted, and in a few cases even harvested. On others awarded in more recent drawings the new landholders are busy preparing their land for this season's agricultural program. And for many of the men so engaged it will be their first actual experience in irrigated farming. There's a lot to learn, but success is just around the corner.

More of these irrigated public land homesteads will be awarded via new fish bowl drawings this year. And still more of them in 1950. The process in fact will continue over a long period of time. The orderly small-group-at-a-time settlement of the land rather than a single concerted rush is an intrinsic part of the new look in homesteading.

Plan Takes Shape

As this is being written the land opening program for 1949 is gradually

(*Continued on page* 154)

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A collection of short stories gives you many different subjects and changes of scene, too, an altogether unrivaled panorama of the west, from cowboy to hard-rock miner. These are the short stories which have stood the test of time and lived to be worthy of collecting between the covers of a book.

WILD WEST by Bertrand W. Sinclair

The west was really wild when Montana cattle rustling was at its height. At the Block S roundup, young Robin Tyler was repping for the Bar M Bar. Poking his nose where it shouldn't have been, Tyler saw Mark Steele, the Block S ramrod, moving a little herd of cows into a hidden canyon. With a little unauthorized snooping, Robin Tyler turned up the interesting bit of information that Steele was the undercover owner of the T Bar S brand, an iron which was looked upon with suspicion because of the truly miraculous increase of its cows each year.

Trying to get the goods on Steele, Tyler gave himself away and was trapped in a line cabin by the kill-hungry Steele. Tyler had never even owned a gun and seemed no match for Steele, who had a reputation as a gunman. But Robin Tyler had no desire to be killed—he had a burning ambition to clean up the rustlers who were preying on the range—and sometimes where there's a will there's a way! You'll find this a crackling fast story of a rustler cleanup.

MARSHAL OF SUNDOWN by Jackson Gregory

Jim Torrance's entrance into the town of Sundown was the end of a long and weary trail for him. It was a vengeance trail, a search for an outlaw and killer named Steve Bordereau who had murdered Jim's partner and framed him for the crime.

Running Bordereau to earth at last, Torrance found him in a saloon and started after him. But at this final, tense moment, he was beaten to the shot. Sally Dawn, a gambling hostess, pulled the trigger on Bordereau as the only way out of the web of intrigue Bordereau had spun around her.

It was not Jim Torrance's way to let a woman be punished for killing a snake like Bordereau and almost without thinking, he went to her help. Fighting his way out of the town, he fled to the mountains with the girl.

On the dodge, Torrance learned that Bordereau had not died and that one Jim Torrance was wanted for a series of holdups and shootings. He knew Bordereau was behind these raids. With characteristic directness, Torrance got himself appointed marshal of Sundown and then rode to face

Bordereau with roaring Colt at the end of the vengeance trail. Action galore.

THE GAY BANDIT OF THE BORDER by Tom Gill

Paco Morales, cattle baron of old Mexico, ruled the border country like a despot, crushing all those who did not give him his way. Suddenly appeared a challenger, a mysterious bandit called El Coyote, who mocked Morales, stole his cattle and gave aid to the miserable peons. As though this were not enough, an American named Ted Radcliffe came to Verdi and took over some choice grazing range the Mexican had always regarded as his own.

The final blow came when Morales' niece fell in love with the hated gringo. All these diverse elements came to white heat and exploded in a crashing battle which rocked the sleepy country like an earthquake. Tops for excitement!

Indian Conservation

A Sidelight on the Red Man

INDIANS never wasted game, nor killed when they did not actually need food. But in one other respect the Indian was a very bad conservationist. He frequently set fire to the grass or even the forests and burned them all off. This was supposed to make the grass grow better, leave a supply of dead and dry wood for fires and drive game within reach.

Bad enough when the Indian had the whole continent at his disposal, this practice became intolerable to the whites when their farms or towns happened to be in the way of a fire. In fact, it was one of the major causes of the Ute war in Colorado in 1879 which ended in the Utes being driven from the state.—*John Black.*

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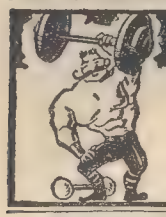

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Homesteading Has a New Look

(Continued from page 151)

taking shape. Officials of the Reclamation Bureau, engineers in charge of the construction and maintenance of the different irrigation projects and other interested Government authorities have been conferring for a long time over the actual dates for opening new blocks of land to the home-seekers. How much public land will be ready for irrigation water, and settlement on such and such a project? And when? What progress can be counted on on another project? How much money has Congress made available for this irrigation block? How much will be needed for another before the land can be thrown open to the waiting applicants.

Tough problems sometimes. But the questions must all be answered before any official announcement of future land opening dates can be released for publication. Thanks to friends in the Bureau we can give you at least a tentative preview of what the 1949 program calls for.

Riverton Project Ready

In the first place early in the year—perhaps almost by the time this reaches the newsstands—more than 5,000 acres in the Riverton irrigation project in Wyoming will be opened to settlement. This block will be broken up into approximately 46 family-size farm units.

Then along about March close to 100 farm units are expected to be ready in the Shoshone-Heart Mountain project, also in Wyoming. June or July should see a large portion of the 7,000 acres of public land lying within the Boise-Payette irrigation project in Idaho ready for new homesteaders. And by mid-summer a small block of about 15 homestead farm units are scheduled to be ready on the Yakima-Roza project in Washington.

Later on in the fall, or possibly along towards the end of the year the Bureau of Reclamation hopes to be able to give the go ahead signal on approximately 1,000 acres of public land in southern California's richly productive Imperial Valley. These homesteads all lying within reach of irrigation water are situated

in the Coachella branch of the All-American Canal project in what is at present warm winter desert country. That means year round crop farming, once water is available. The 1,000 acre block will be divided into approximately 25 separate farms or farm units.

As time goes on and the now nearly completed irrigation projects are finished, main and lateral canals constructed and so forth the program for successive new openings will be stepped up, and kept as far as is humanly possible in high gear. For instance next year or soon thereafter the Bureau of Reclamation hopes to have 200,000 acres of land in the Columbia Basin project in Washington ready for settlement.

Sure, that's in the future. It's not today nor tomorrow. But time passes more quickly than you realize. And it is not too far ahead but what those really interested in getting themselves their share of Uncle Sam's land bounty—and a valuable farm home of their own in the West in the bargain—should begin making plans now. You know what has always been said about the early bird. It applies to today's homesteads as well as worms.

For anyone genuinely interested in present day homesteading on public land irrigated farm units in the West the first step to take is simple. You can do it now. Write the Commissioner, Bureau of Reclamation, Department of the Interior, Washington 25, D. C. for a copy of the booklet, "Settlement Opportunities on Reclamation Projects". The booklet is free. It summarizes the opportunities offered by this new type of homesteading, and the regulations under which such homesteads may be obtained. In addition it answers many pertinent questions the prospective homesteader is likely to ask, and it gives the addresses of the various different Regional Headquarters offices of the Bureau of Reclamation in the western States in which the irrigation projects themselves lie.

Rules Are Simple

Meantime here are just a few things regarding these homesteads and homesteading in general that should be remembered. [*Turn page*]

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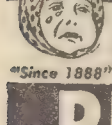

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1:—In the first place veterans of World War II have a 90-day preference, provided by law, in homesteading public lands. Moreover their war service counts—up to 2 years—toward the 3-year residence needed to establish ownership. And fifty percent of the homestead land or farm unit must be cropped and under irrigation for 2 years before a final patent can be obtained.

2:—Settlers on public lands will need some ready cash and credit resources in order to establish themselves and produce a crop. Such financing is usually not available through ordinary mortgage or other credit channels since the land is not properly the settler's until his homestead has been proved up by actual residence on the land and cultivation of it. However for World War II veterans certain loans may be granted under the GI Bill of Rights in connection with the development of their irrigated homestead farms.

3:—The homestead law requires that the prospective entryman be 21 years of age, or the head of a family (unless he is a World War II veteran.) But there is nothing to prevent an otherwise qualified ex-Wac, ex-Wave or former lady marine from being awarded an irrigated homestead, and proving up the title to it in her own name. The gals can get in on it too—if they've got the stamina, the muscle and the pioneer spirit of their grandmothers.

Citizens Only Considered

In addition the prospective homesteader must be a citizen of the United States, or have formally declared his intention to become one (that is have his first papers;) and with certain exceptions he must not own more than 160 acres of land in the United States or have previously used his entryman's rights to homestead lands.

4:—Besides the usual necessary costs of getting started on any new, raw farm land settlers on homesteads within an irrigation project have an obligation to pay the Federal Government a pro-rata share of the construction costs of the project that supplies their land with water, and also their pro-rata portion of the annual charge for operation and

maintenance of the irrigation works. The construction cost, however, is interest free, and paid for over a long period of years, usually 40. This is not an onerous burden generally speaking considering the high value of irrigated farm lands in the West, nor is it intended to be. Remember you are getting a richly productive well-watered farm, not just a hunk of potential dust bowl.

5:—The size of the farms varies from a few small ones of 10 acres adaptable to certain specialty crops to 160 irrigable acres under one ownership—the maximum to which water can be delivered under irrigation law. Each unit, however, is designed to support a family farming operation.

Aside from the above, if you qualify and your name is drawn, the farm is yours to develop and prove up your homestead title on.

The homesteader of earlier days, pushing, shoving and fighting for his tract of public land—any old land—would gape in amazement at the new order in homesteading. But today the old land frontiers have vanished, some of them literally blown away in dust. Instead the new frontier of irrigated farms is taking its place in homestead history.

It's as up-to-date as jet propulsion—and going places even faster.

Answers to COW-COUNTRY QUIZ

(See Page 139)

1. Buffalo, which regarded the telegraph poles as ideal back-scratchers and rubbed them down by the thousands.

2. In the stove, a risky procedure which sometimes backfired. Billy Maher was killed by such an explosion and four men coming through the snow to help him were buried in an avalanche.

3. Not from Texas to Kansas as popularly supposed. The first important trail drives were from New Mexico to the California gold fields.

4. Yes, Anna Richey was caught, tried and sentenced for rustling in 1919. On her way to trial she was ambushed and shot, but recovered, was sentenced, then died mysteriously before she could serve any time.

5. "A Texas cow crossed with a locomotive." The most scrubby animal killed by a train was always claimed to be a valuable thoroughbred and the railroad had to pay the bill.

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DOES IT PAY?

Some facts about America's most dangerous sport!

By REX SHERRICK

RODEO is well known as a tough and dangerous game where death is always an unwelcome guest and injuries are too common to even discuss. But big prize money has always been a lure to the hardy and adventurous. The question is, however, does it really pay?

There are about 2000 members of the Rodeo Cowboys' Association—top hands all of them. They follow the rodeo circuits and engage in approximately 700 shows a year. Obviously no one man can compete in 700 shows a year but there are that many opportunities if he wants them. Actually, a good professional will compete in about 30 rodeos a year.

He spends about $2500 on equipment and his average net income for the year is about $3000. Does that sound like big money? Well, a few lucky, or terrific performers latch on to prizes running up to $30,000. But a whole lot more go home broke or in debt. And they are lucky they get home without injuries and medical bills to pay. More than half of all prize money goes for expenses including equipment, travel, entry fees and medical expenses.

And here's the final kicker—rodeo contestants, like boxers, are, with a few notable exceptions, old men at 30. The moment a man's reflexes begin to slow up, he is through. And it is a wise man who walks out before he is carried out. Yes, rodeo is a terrific sport, from the safety of the box seats. But it's a grim business for the professional.

THE TALLY BOOK

(Continued from page 6)

were a seething mass of flame. The banker Burton rushed out onto the bank porch.

"You did it! You did it!" he screamed, pointing at Clay.

"Yes, I did," Clay grinned. "You should have known I wouldn't let you get away with it." He grabbed Burton by the shoulder and flung him inside.

"Fill It Up!"

Then his gun was out and covering both the banker and the three surprised men back of the wire cage. He took a canvas bag from his shirt and handed it to Eddie.

"Have them fill it up!" he ordered.

So began the career of Clay Burch's band—bank robbers who never committed a murder or hurt anyone if they could help it, yet who gained the name of the most desperate and bloodthirsty gang in the west. As you follow Clay Burch's adventures you see how little good intentions mean, how Fate dogs a man's steps and shapes his life in spite of his struggles.

This is a novel with a kick like a Missouri mule, with the snap of fast riding action and the boom of gunshots and the raw clash of men who fought and who never knew when they were licked. It's a yarn you'll never forget.

Out of Yuma

With it is a novelet, GUNS AT GALLOWS CROSSING, by Dwight V. Swain, an action crammed story with a nice twist in plot.

Jud Hamling broke Maricopa Quinn out of Yuma Prison where Quinn was held on a murder conviction.

Hamling was no philanthropist, however, and he was doing it out of no liking for Quinn, nor out of any conviction that Quinn had been given a raw deal. In fact, Jud Hamling was interested only in Jud Hamling and he freed Quinn because he had reason to think Quinn would escape anyway and dig up evidence pinning the murder on Ham-

[*Turn page*]

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ling himself. His plan, therefore, was to get Quinn out and then have him killed to shut his mouth safely. With Quinn would be killed square-shooting Sheriff George Reese, because Reese was in the way of some of Hamling's owlhoot plans. It would be a very neat deal in fact to get rid of both his enemies at one fell swoop and put the blame right back on Quinn, somehow.

A neat deal it was, but an even neater deal when Maricopa Quinn somehow became aware of the thickening plot around him. There was also a girl and these three, Quinn, Sheriff Reese and the girl, make up as exciting a team as you've ever adventured with in these pages. GUNS AT GALLOWS CROSSING is swift and enjoyable reading.

Amazing Henry Plummer

Third in the featured billing is THE MOST CONSUMMATE VILLAIN by Frederick Bechdolt, another in this famous author's fine historical series on the West. THE MOST CONSUMMATE VILLAIN is the amazing story of the amazing Henry Plummer, the sheriff who was also a leader of as fine and bloodthirsty a crew of outlaws and killers as the West ever knew. This is a fascinating story which might have been exciting fiction, but is all the more thrilling because it is true.

Finally we have Boo-Boo Bounce, back in a new adventure by Frank Bennett titled PHILOSOPHER, AND NO MISTAKE. Boo-Boo is struck down by the singing arrows of Dan Cupid—he falls with a most heavy thud, for a luscious blonde named appropriately enough, Lilly Lou Luscious. Falling in love is no painless matter for our plump hero and Boo-Boo suffers many indignities and no mistake. However, with Hopewell's aid, Boo-Boo faces his troubles as sternly as his quivering chins will permit. And if you do not quiver with laughter, we

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shall be muchly surprised. And no mistake.

That isn't all. There are other short stories galore, features, tidbits—and your old Ramrod will be on tap as usual.

The Mail Bag

THE innovation we launched in our last issue with THE MIRACULOUS FRONTIERSMAN has drawn some interesting letters from readers. Like this one:

I think you are doing a marvelous thing in printing real true stories like the one about Buffalo Bill. It proves that truth is stranger than and just about as exciting as fiction. Why make up stories out of your imagination when the real thing is so much better?

—*Amy L. Woodrod, El Paso, Tex.*

Or this one:

Jackson Cole's fictionized biography of Buffalo Bill sure gave Cody all the breaks. There are plenty of other versions of his duel with

[*Turn page*]

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Yellow Hand that aren't as complimentary as this one. And plenty of old-timers will tell you that Buffalo Bill was the product of a smart press agent—author Ned L. Buntline. Buffalo Bill was a showman from the start and he knew how to capitalize on the few colorful things he did.

—Philip Haskins, Boston, Mass.

That's two sides of the coin, so to speak—fore and aft. Maybe Buffalo Bill's reputation has grown quite a bit with the legend of the years. Who knows? Maybe the same is true of any celebrity, hero or national figure. But there is a backbone of truth in all legends and these are the closest we can get to the real life as it was. And this very sentiment is expressed by a third letter from a reader, to wit:

Reading THE MIRACULOUS FRONTIERSMAN was a wonderful experience. It doesn't matter whether Jackson Cole was glorifying his hero a little or not. The story brought back to life the real people of that time and made them seem alive again instead of just names in a book. That's real craftsmanship and my hat is off to Mr. Cole.

—Lillian Weltsher, St. Paul, Minn.

The letters were a hundred to one for this type of story, even Mr. Haskins' remarks being favorable, and his criticism aimed only at Buffalo Bill's reputation. We liked the experiment ourselves and may repeat it some day.

DIG MY GRAVE by Lee Priestly in the April GIANT WESTERN was my idea of a real story. It had action for them as wants it and it had real salty characters like the old-timers I knew out in New Mexico thirty and forty years ago. You can't miss the real thing.

—Leon Jackson, Tampa, Florida.

You sure can't, Leon, but it's nice to have our judgment backed up by an old timer who was there when.

Friends, when you've finished reading a story in GIANT WESTERN why not take a minute to jot down on a postcard or letter your opinion of it and of the issue as a whole, and shoot it in by Pony Express, air mail or dogcart? We'd be plumb tickled to have your letters and glad to print them so you can show them off to your friends. Let's hear from you! Just address The Ramrod, GIANT WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York, 16, N. Y. Thanks, everybody! Until next time—

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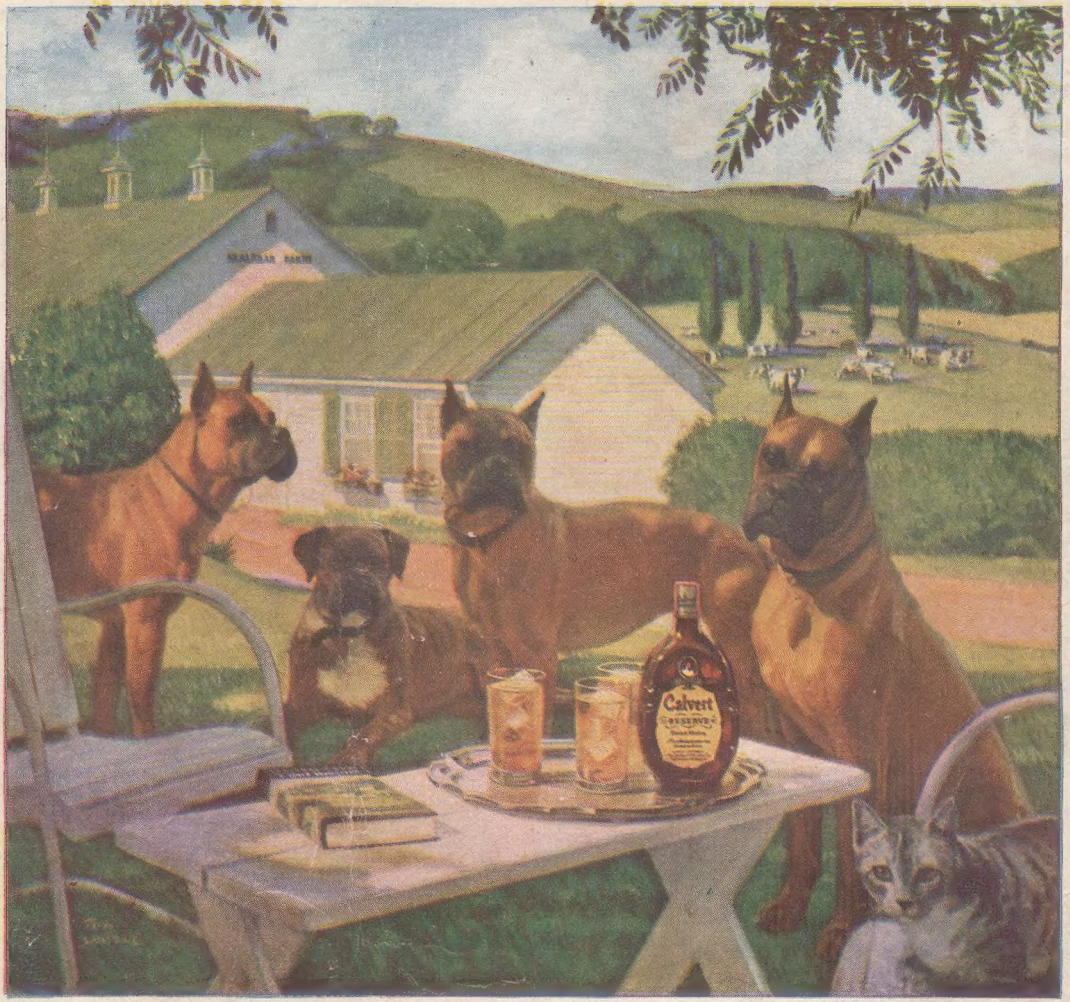

Left to right—"Folly," "Gina," "Baby" and "Rex," favorite boxers of author-farmer Louis Bromfield, at famous Malabar Farm, Lucas, Ohio.

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